

KINGS AND MADMEN - A NOVEL

Ted Baker

A Thesis  
in  
The Department  
of  
English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts at  
Concordia University  
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

November 1978

© Ted Baker, 1978

## ABSTRACT

### KINGS AND MADMEN -- A NOVEL

Ted Baker

This is a fictional story of a modern day high school and the people who inhabit it. The story focuses upon eight central characters--both students and teachers--and explores the various relationships they have one with another.

The story is based not upon fact, but upon possibility. Within these pages, the school becomes not only a reflection of what can and may occur within the walls of any modern high school, but also a microcosm of the world itself.

Any resemblance of the characters in this novel to persons living or dead is strictly coincidental.

Kings and Madmen

a novel by Ted Baker

## Chapter one:

Robert Petersen rose from his seat and gave the bell cord two quick tugs to signal his stop. The driver, hearing the bell, glanced quickly in the mirror and edged the lumbering city bus towards the curb.

When the bus eased to a stop, Petersen pushed open the rear door and stepped down to the concrete sidewalk that ran the edge of Fletcher's Field Park. He paused, waiting patiently as the bus pulled away from the curb, and the toxic fumes of its exhaust dissipated in the cool morning air. There was no hurry. For two weeks he and old man Griffen had been working steadily on Parkview High's student timetable, but with that finished the sense of urgency was gone.

Tomorrow Parkview opened its doors to students for the new school year, but today there was nothing to be done but his introduction to the arriving staff members.

Petersen turned and glanced up at the wooded hill sloping gently towards the sky on the far side of Park Avenue. Although he had lived in Montreal all his life, he still enjoyed the realization that Mont Royal, with its lake and paths and acres of tall green trees, sat quiet and unscarred in the very heart of the city.

He enjoyed, as well, the awareness that Fletcher's Field and the Mountain were so accessible to Parkview High. The school



had no yard or playground of its own, managing only to squeeze out space for two small parking lots from the buildings and busy streets that hemmed it on all sides.

Swinging about lightly on the leather soles of his shoes, Petersen slowly made his way across the park. At the far side he crossed Esplanade and walked east on Rachel the short block to Saint Urbain Street. He passed the old Armory, its small lower windows barred and shuttered, and made his way towards the school. As he approached the main entrance he became aware of Parkview's tired exterior, its squat frame darkened by time and age, its rows of windows like glassy eyes turned inward on fading memories.

The school principal, Mike Griffen, had told him Parkview's history. The school, it seemed, had been built over fifty years before, and for a long time had been populated almost entirely by the wave of European Jews who had arrived in Montreal during the twenties and thirties. In later years, the Jews had moved away from the Parkview area, heading north and west, becoming the new middle class, and leaving the gap to be filled by those who followed--the new immigrants--the Greeks and the Portugese.

The Jews had left a heritage of famous graduates for Parkview. Writers, politicians, businessmen had once sat and studied in Parkview classrooms. But that time had come and gone with the generations of students. Faces and habits and language had all changed, and only Parkview remained. Now the classrooms were

scarred and worn, the cafeteria too small, the library overcrowded. There was no auditorium, no play area other than the windowless basement, and only one common shower room in the old, barren gymnasium.

Petersen shook his head. It was only last spring, a few short months before, that he had learned of his pending promotion to vice-principal of Parkview High. For years he had taught at Weston--a larger, newer school--and he was not a part of Parkview yet. That would take time and experience. He would have to learn and adapt as he went along.

Briskly he strode up the short, twisting flight of stairs to the first floor, pulled open the glass and metal door at the top of the stairwell and stepped across the hall to the Main Office. It had been here, in the office, that he had spent most of his waking hours for the last two weeks, and because the secretaries had not yet arrived, he was suddenly aware of the stillness and the quiet, as though the office, like a living thing, had slept the night and only now began to rouse itself. He reached for the notice that had been placed in his message box the previous afternoon and made his way down the short, L-shaped passage that connected the Main Office to his own. He placed his briefcase on his desk and dropped heavily into the worn, padded chair. The notice was a reminder of the staff meeting to be held that morning and a schedule of the shortened periods to be followed on the first day of school.

The first day of school was always a half-day at Parkview, with each of the normal periods shortened from fifty minutes to twenty-five. This allowed students to orient themselves, without unnecessary waste of time.

Petersen swung his chair around and looked out the narrow window of his office. For a moment he felt a small knot of apprehension in his chest. It was about to begin. A new year. A new job. He was about to meet the teaching staff--the people he would be working with to make Parkview a better place--and he wanted that first impression to go well.

Petersen didn't feel that he looked much like a vice-principal. He wasn't tall. His stature certainly didn't give him an air of authority. He was of medium build if anything. Medium height; medium weight; perhaps a bit too soft around the middle although he tried to keep the excess down with sporadic attempts at tennis and cross-country skiing. Perhaps his beard helped. It was a thick, full beard that covered much of his face and made him look a few years older than he really was. And he had been told that his nose and eyes were "sharply etched" on his face; meaning, he supposed, that his nose was long and pointed and that his eyes grew small and beady when he looked intensely at people, which he was in the habit of doing. But looks alone did not make vice-principals. There were other qualities more important. Qualities he would just have to learn to develop if he found them missing from his bag of traits.

He consciously relaxed the tightness in his shoulders, turned back to his desk, and began to write. He jotted down several reminders and briefly sketched out what he wanted to say to the staff later that morning. When he had finished, he stretched, stood up from the chair and moved closer to the window. From here he looked down into the larger of the school's two parking lots. He had noticed previously that Parkview was oddly constructed. It was, in essence, a three-storied, three-sided square. On the missing edge of the square were the sides of two apartment buildings standing back to back, separated only by a narrow, unpaved alleyway. A passageway off Saint Urbain Street which ran between one building and the school allowed cars to reach the courtyard formed by the school's three wings.

Petersen stared at the dark, quiet classrooms that faced him across the courtyard, until a movement in the corner of his eye caused him to turn his head towards the neighbouring building. An old Chinese woman, small and grey even in the bright morning light that now reached into the shadows of the courtyard, hung wash on a clothesline from her balcony. He could hear her singing; faintly, melodically, her voice like the whisper of a wind chime.

The buzzer on his phone rang suddenly, startling him. He lifted the receiver from its cradle. "Petersen here."

"Mr. Griffen is in his office, Mr. Petersen. He'd like to see you now, if you're free?" The voice was that of Mrs. Sealson, the efficient head-secretary whom Petersen had quickly come to

appreciate.

"Thanks Mrs. Sealson, I'll be right in."

Mike Griffen was a large, round-faced man with noticeable jowls and sparse grey hair. He was no taller than Petersen, but carried sixty-five more pounds beneath his tight-fitting blue suit. Petersen knew that as a principal Griffen was mainly concerned with keeping things running as smoothly as possible. Although short on innovation, he was considered an excellent public relations man, and armed with a quick handshake had maintained a good rapport with the Parkview community.

"Well Bob, this is it," Griffen said lightly. "The beginning of another year. The older you get, the faster they seem to roll around." He glanced at his watch. "The staff should be in by now. I'll take you down to the staffroom and introduce you. As I've said before, they're basically a good bunch, and they're usually willing to go along with things if you approach them right. Nothing worse than any other staff and nothing you won't be able to handle. Although I think you'll find the information in my little file useful when you're dealing with them. As I told you, I make a habit of keeping little notes like that--I find they can come in handy."

Petersen nodded. The little notes Griffen had referred to were personal files he kept on each Parkview teacher. He had been quite surprised when Griffen had suggested--insisted almost--that he read them carefully. It somehow didn't seem right to

7

read about people he had not yet met, especially when the incidents recorded--things like student complaints and school participation--ranged from the trivial to the highly personal. He could not help wondering what his own file would someday contain and what Griffen would come to think of him.

"Well," Griffen grunted, lifting his bulk slowly from the large leather chair, "let's be on our way."

Petersen was already familiar with the walk to the staffroom. Out of the office and to the left until you reach the intersecting hallway, then left again almost to the end of the long central corridor. With the odd three-sided shape of the school it was easy to find one's way around, but difficult to get from one wing of the school to the other without circling back through the connecting corridor. A passageway directly linking the two wings would make travelling in Parkview a great deal easier; but that, he knew, was financially out of the question.

When the two men entered the staffroom it was filled with the low hum of conversation, and the smoke of too many cigarettes. There was still a few minutes before the staff meeting was scheduled to begin and several separate clusters of teachers were engaged in animated discussion. The largest group had gathered in the staff kitchen, a second, smaller room attached by an open doorway to the main staffroom.

From the kitchen, a second open archway on the far wall led .

to the cloakroom and the separate staff toilets, and another door, this one off the end of the long wooden dining table, exited on the corridor.

"Let's get a cup of coffee and I'll introduce you," Griffen said.

The two men made their way through the staffroom and into the kitchen. Griffen found two styrofoam cups in the cupboard beside the sink and filled them with steaming black coffee. Two teachers stood by the coffee urn talking quietly, ignoring the activity around them.

Griffen interrupted. "Steve. Christina. I'd like you to meet Bob Petersen, our new vice-principal. Bob--this is Stephen Chambers from our English department--and Christina Arianakis, who teaches French for us.

"And Greek," Christina added. "French and Greek."

Griffen handed Petersen the coffee and glanced around. "Wait here a minute," he suggested. "I'll find some cream and sugar."

"Welcome to Parkview, Mr. Petersen," Stephen Chambers greeted the new vice-principal. "I heard on the grapevine this morning that you've come to us from Weston High. You may find it quite a change here at dear old Parkview, but I don't think we're nearly as bad as we're sometimes made out to be. We hang on to our tough reputation because it helps convince the School Board we can put their money to good use, but beneath it all it's a pretty nice place."

For a moment Petersen wondered if Stephen Chambers was being facetious. In past years Parkview had sent athletic teams to Weston, and the small, dark players had always seemed strange and alien in contrast to the bigger, fairer Weston students. The Parkview athletes had always chattered to one another in a rapid combination of Greek and English, flowing from one dialect to the other, while the games themselves had been tough, physical affairs, with neither team giving ground.

Petersen had heard stories about Parkview that told of drugs and fighting and discipline problems. Parkview was, after all, and inner-city school.

He looked at Stephen Chambers. Chambers was smiling but his face was serious. He seemed to believe what he said. Perhaps Parkview wasn't as hard or as bad as people in other schools imagined it to be.

"Anyway," Chambers was saying, "we're glad you're here. We lost a good man when Stan Alston retired, but it's nice to have some new blood in Parkview."

Looking at Chambers now, Petersen recalled Griffen's file. It had mentioned that Chambers was active in school affairs. He had coached teams, directed school plays, helped organize a work-study program. He was twenty-six, but had a youthful face that wasn't disguised by the dark blond mustache that covered his upper lip. They were about the same height, Petersen estimated, although not the same build, Chambers appearing to be fit and



broad-shouldered in contrast to his own noticeable and regretted paunchiness. The teacher's hair, like his mustache, was a dark sandy blond, thin, but curling down over his ears, his face had a strong chiseled look that bespoke Scandinavian ancestry.

"The only thing you have to watch out for," Chambers added with a smile, "are the wild women here." He glanced at Christina Arianakis as he spoke. "They chew up poor guys like us for breakfast."

Petersen laughed, and Christina said, "Don't listen to him, Mr. Petersen. It's the men on this staff who are wild!"

"Well," Petersen responded, "since you two don't seem to know who has the upper hand around here, I guess I'll just have to wait and find out for myself."

He saw Christina smile politely. She was quite young--no more than twenty-three--and Griffen's files had mentioned nothing more than the fact that as a Greek she was useful in working with parents as a translator and liason person, and that she had set up a warm relationship with many of Parkview's students during her two years of teaching.

Christina's face was broad and pale and framed by dark brown hair that curled in soft, loose ringlets to a point just below her ears. Petersen thought her attractive, drawn to her high cheekbones and wide, full mouth. She was not a tall woman, and although small-breasted the flesh on her neck and arms hinted at a weight

problem that was yet to come. Her smile, when he saw it was small and cautious, and her eyes, although dark and warm, were at the same time reserved and hesitant.

Griffen reappeared with the cream and sugar. "Here we go, Bob," he said, adding milk to Petersen's coffee. "Do you take sugar?"

"Just milk, thanks," Petersen said. "Sugar fattens me up."

"Well listen," Griffen remarked, patting his own broad waistline, "you've got to have something to protect you from the long, cold winters."

Petersen and the others laughed, and Griffen tapped his belly again, pleased with his own humor. His smile faded quickly as a loud female voice suddenly resounded through the main staff-room, rising above the general hum of noise and shattering into high-pitched laughter.

Chambers glanced towards the archway that led into the kitchen. "I see Reena made it this morning," he said flatly. And then, more directly to Petersen, "Never a dull moment at Parkview, Mr. Petersen. You can count on that."

The name Reena struck a chord in Petersen's mind. She taught History and Griffen's notes had been direct and surprising. Reena, it seemed, was somewhat unconventional for a female teacher, and Griffen was not certain how he should deal with her. He seemed to find no favor in Reena's behavior, but he couldn't get rid of her without a good deal of trouble for himself and

for Parkview, and he knew it.

"There he is..." a female voice shouted from the entrance to the kitchen. Petersen looked up. There you are, he thought, staring at Reena Kellner.

Reena was staring at Bob Petersen from the doorway. Smiling, she made her way around the dining table and linked her arm in the new vice-principal's.

"Don't worry, Bob," she said casually. "I've volunteered to take care of you, and you have nothing to worry about. Have you been introduced to everyone?" she asked, waving a hand in the general direction of the other people in the room.

Petersen began to answer, but she continued, cutting him off. "Not yet?--good--we can start with that. You don't mind do you, boss?" she asked casually, directing her gaze at Mike Griffen. "Of course not--so it's settled. Come along, Bob--you don't mind if I call you Bob--we're quite friendly and informal here."

She tugged at Petersen's arm and began to lead him back around the table towards the staffroom. Petersen smiled at Chambers and Christina Arianakis and shrugged his shoulders. Griffen turned to the coffee urn and re-filled his cup, saying nothing.

"Good luck," Stephen Chambers called after them.

As they walked towards the archway leading to the staffroom, Reena began a long-distance introduction of Bob Petersen to other teachers still in the kitchen. "Ron--this is Bob Petersen, our new boss-man. Penny--Bob Petersen. Annie--say hello to our new vice-principal."

Reena led him from teacher to teacher, circling the staffroom. Petersen tried to match the faces with the names he recalled from Griffen's files, but the pace was too fast and he abandoned the effort, letting himself be swept along on Reena's energy, smiling and shaking hands with the strangers he was meeting.

"And finally," Reena said, as they completed a full tour of the room. "this is Pat Ender, our resident art teacher."

Pat stood up and they shook hands. Her hair was done in a short wiry Afro, and she wore metal-rimmed glasses.

"Welcome to Parkview," Pat said firmly. "I hope you like it here, and I hope Reena hasn't already frightened you with stories of all the confusion we generally run into this time of year."

"I haven't told him a thing, sweetie," Reena promised. "I thought we could leave him with a few surprises, just to test his ingenuity." She smiled and hugged Petersen's arm.

"Yes, I suppose I should be prepared for a few surprises," he said genially.

"I'm afraid it might be more than a few simple surprises that test your ingenuity here, Mr. Petersen," Pat remarked without smiling. "It takes a special kind of personality to understand

Parkview. Some people have it--some don't. A lot of people don't realize that. They don't see the high school for what it is. They have their own preconceptions, and when the images don't work out they can't quite cope with it."

There was an awkward moment of silence as Petersen realized that Pat was subtly referring to Weston High and his long years in its suburban setting.

Reena spoke first. "You might as well sit down," she told Petersen, pointing to the two long tables that stood near one wall of the staffroom. "The meeting is about to begin, and you're the star attraction."

When the meeting ended, Pat Ender went up to the art room on the second floor. She was grateful that the art room and the staffroom were close to one another and not at opposite end of the school, because their proximity made it easy for her to slip down between classes to grab a cigarette, or use the toilet.

She left the staffroom, turning right in the hall, and made her way through the glass doorway of the stairwell. She walked quickly up the sixteen steps to the landing, turned the sharp angle that led to the second flight of stairs--only fourteen here, she had counted them--took them briskly for the exercise, pushed open a door identical to the one on the floor below, and emerged on the second floor corridor. Panting slightly from her exertion, Pat turned to the first door on her right and unlocked it.

She had always liked being in the art room. It was her room. It was a sanctuary from the daily struggles and confusion that were a natural part of Parkview High. Here, she made the decisions; she controlled the atmosphere and environment; she created the mood and tempo of her class much like a thermostat controlled and created the temperature of the air.

Pat looked around. The painters had been in during the summer. The walls were now a distasteful pale brown. She frowned. Griffen had given the painters the go-ahead without bothering to consult her. It was typical and it wasn't surprising. As far as she was concerned, Griffen had never shown any real concern for the staff--for the people he supposedly worked with--he simply went on his merry way, doing whatever the hell popped into his simple mind; riding roughshod over those who let him, and avoiding those others--like herself--who stood up to him.

He didn't have to spend half his life in this room, so of course he didn't care if the walls were a revolting, institutional brown. Goddamn him anyway. Pale brown. What crap! An art room should be painted like a whorehouse not a funeral parlor.

Pat sighed and shook her head. She would have her students repaint the walls, or at least cover them up with their own work. Griffen hadn't heard the last of this.

The painters had left the furniture piled in one corner. Pat quickly sketched out a rough map of where things would be placed for the coming year and began to rearrange the room.

At the far end of the classroom studio was a large storeroom where Pat kept her supplies, and to the left of the storeroom door she put one of her long tables and several stools. To the right of the door she placed her roundtable--the perfect table for group projects--and along the left wall, just beneath the row of shelves, she settled the tall folding screen that she used to section off parts of the classroom.

In the very center of the room, three long tables were placed end to end forming the nucleus of the student work area. Chairs were placed around the tables, stools were set at random around the room, and her work was done. The room still looked bare and unfeeling, but that wouldn't last long. In a week the classroom would resemble an actual studio, and the open spaces would quickly disappear beneath the color-streaked work of the art classes.

Pat Ender sat on one of the wooden chairs and lit a cigarette. She thought about the staff meeting that had just ended. It had been a bit of a disappointment. Petersen seemed like a good man at heart, but he didn't sound tough enough for the job. His speech had been too full of "working together" and not quite practical enough for her taste. Parkview needed a firm hand, not a humanist. Maybe that was the trouble. Petersen seemed to be too much of a bleeding heart, too full of the concepts of patience and understanding. All well and good, but a vice-principal had to be tough. That was his first and primary task. He had to be someone teachers could fall back on if they had any trouble. He was the bad guy--

the heavy--even if he didn't want to be--even if it went against his nature. Authority. That was the name of the game. And if you couldn't play by those rules, you couldn't play at all.

Petersen would have to be careful. If he didn't keep those kids respectful right off the bat the little buggers would run right over him just for the hell of it. The kids were okay. They were a lot less trouble in Parkview than in most schools, even though the inner-city label created a lot of exaggerated stories. But kids were still kids, and even good kids sometimes took advantage if the opportunity presented itself.

Pat sighed again. Today was really the calm before the storm. Tomorrow the students would thunder in and there would be no peace whatsoever for at least a week. There was always chaos when the year began. New students got lost, old students wanted course changes, there were not enough desks in some classrooms and too many in others. Lockers had to be assigned, supplies sold, books given out, names to learn, problems to solve, and worst of all--endless forms to fill out in duplicate.

Pat knew it was all coming. She realized that the long, warm summer holiday was really at an end and that there would be no more gentle days of lying in sunshine and staying up late at night for a midnight snack and a movie. The summer had passed quickly, as it always did, and the cold winter lay ahead. But she didn't regret the change--didn't regret getting back to work. Early in the summer she had never wanted the holiday to end, never



wanted to get back to the turmoil of teaching. It wasn't an unusual feeling. Most teachers felt the same way. It was all part of the job. But she was rested now, and ready to go. She could face the challenge of another year--her sixth in teaching and her thirty-second in life--and she looked forward to what the months ahead might hold.

She took a final drag from her cigarette, dropped it to the floor and crushed it under her canvas shoe. She was already wearing the clothes she would teach in the following day--an old, faded, green workshirt, a pair of worn jeans, and the old tennis shoes she found so comfortable. Some teachers, although dressed casually today, would wear dresses--or jackets and ties--for the students tomorrow. They felt, Pat imagined, that teachers were not students and therefore should not dress like them. Perhaps it was valid reasoning. Perhaps some students did respect a teacher who looked like a teacher was supposed to look. Perhaps respect really was a visual perception and not a gut emotion. Perhaps--but she doubted it. Most kids were smarter than that. And even if it were true, she wouldn't dress any differently than she did now. She couldn't afford to. Half the clothes she owned were already spattered with paint or glue, and she wasn't about to sacrifice the few things that remained.

The bell rang and Pat was startled. She would have to get used to bells again. They rang at least fifteen times a day, and teachers as well as students learned to sit and stand and walk

and eat to their shrill hammer.

Pat glanced around the room. It was as ready as it could be for the moment. The students could begin decorating tomorrow.

Well, she thought to herself, at least I don't have a homeroom this year. Without a homeroom she would have the first period free every morning, and her teaching day wouldn't begin until nine-thirty. Pat enjoyed the idea. She was the first to admit that she never functioned well in the morning, anyway.

The thought of the mass arrival of students the following day let Pat to think of one student in particular--Karen Hudak. Karen was a senior this year, but had taken Pat's senior art course while still in grade ten. Pat had first discovered Karen's natural ability while the girl was taking the introductory art course in grade nine, and she had done everything she could to encourage Karen to continue painting. Because of her potential, Karen would spend the year working independently under Pat's guidance, and Pat looked forward to the possibility that Karen might discover in herself a gifted artist waiting to emerge from the shell of her youthful uncertainties.

She and Karen had grown quite friendly the last two years, and Karen had called twice over the summer. The first time she had called just to chat, and had told Pat that her summer job was horrible and that she looked forward to getting back to school. The second time she had called--less than a week ago--she had been nervous and agitated, and although Pat had tried to steer

her from the trivialities, Karen had seemed hesitant to talk, and had finally hung up without speaking her mind.

At first Pat had thought it might have been Mrs. Hudak's illness. She knew that Karen's mother had been ill for some time, and that Karen lived alone with her and was largely responsible for her mother's care. But when she had asked Karen about her mother's health during their conversation, Karen had told her that she was doing well and seemed to be improving. Obviously there was something else bothering the girl, and since she did not consider Karen the kind of person who exaggerated her feelings, she was a little concerned. But she also knew that Karen was bright and mature for her seventeen years, and felt that if Karen really needed someone to talk to, she would come to her sooner or later. Until that time came, she would just have to be patient.

The first light of early morning began to dissolve the opaque darkness of Karen Hudak's bedroom. She rolled from her back to her side and peered at the faintly luminescent dial of the clock on the small table by her bed. Her alarm would not sound for another hour. A morning breeze lifted the edge of the blue serge curtain covering the open window, and although she felt a slight chill on her arms and naked shoulders, she was aware that her feet were damp and perspiring beneath the sheet. She moved, tossing again as she had so often since waking in the darkness a full hour earlier, bringing her knees closer to her chest, her

elbows pressed against her side, her hands covering her face.

It was the morning of the first day of school, and Karen Hudak's thoughts kept her from the forgetfulness of sleep.

It had been a working summer, and she had spent six days a week selling clothes to middle-aged women in a small dress shop on Saint Denis Street, struggling to speak French with her customers and frightened by her boss--a fat balding man who never kept his hands to himself. Karen would not have stayed with the job after the first few trying days, except that she didn't want to be stuck at home, and the money was needed. She had long been aware that her mother's welfare cheque could not cover more than the necessities for both of them, and that her illness--an illness that had slowly changed her mother from a robust, laughing woman to a thin, quiet shadow of her self--required medication and a special diet. So Karen worked on at the job she disliked, and her boss kept her because she was young and pretty and because he could pay her less than the minimum wage, and in cash so that no record of her employment had to be kept.

As the summer came to an end, Karen was relieved that she was not quitting school as she had contemplated in the spring, and that she was able to leave fat Mr. Morel and his dirty hands and his horrible store. But she was nervous about it too. She had missed her friends over the summer, missed having someone to talk to, but going back to school would bring her face to face with a decision she had not yet fully made.

She had wanted to talk to someone about it, had tried calling people on the phone--Elena, Miss Ender--but it hadn't been what she needed; she hadn't been able to say what she wanted to say. It had been too impersonal, the distance too great on the phone. She tried as well, to talk to her mother, to share her own fears and questions, but somehow a feeling of pain--a feeling that was perhaps her own inarticulate understanding of her mother's life--had always overcome her, and in her sadness she had grown silent.

Now school, so welcome, and yet so frightening, was about to begin. She would find someone to talk to. And she would see John Vavaris.

The thought of John Vavaris quickened her pulse. Now she would find out what the summer had meant to him--and to herself. Again she tossed restlessly in her bed. What did he really think of her? What would he tell his friends? She could recall how it had all begun. Here, lying nervously in her bed she could piece it together like the parts of a puzzle or the fragments of a dream, and the thoughts drifted like colored slides across her closed eyelids.

One day late the previous spring she had been eating her lunch alone in the school cafeteria. For one reason or another--a make-up quiz, an illness--her several close friends had not eaten lunch with her and she was bored. As she ate at the long formica table, Karen noticed the sun streaming through the cafeteria's long uncurtained windows, and fully realized for the

first time that the last of the cold and rainy spring had disappeared, and that the day was a perfect preview of the warm, sun-filled summer that lay ahead.

Pleased with her discovery, and buoyed by the thought that summer vacation was no longer a distant dream, but rather a fast approaching reality and a welcome respite from the tension of classes and study, Karen left the school and made her way to a park bench along the edge of Fletcher's Field Park. The sun had dried all but the most stubborn patches of mud the spring rains had strewn across the park, and already a large group of boys were noisily engaged in a spirited game of soccer, their pants rolled up above their knees and their shirts tossed carelessly on the brown-green grass.

Karen sat enjoying the sun, her eyes closed, her face tilted skywards letting the warm rays melt the tenseness in her shoulders. Her mind was calm and thoughtless and the throaty shouts of the boys on the soccer field drifted in and out of her consciousness on the edge of a soft breeze that moved across the park.

Suddenly a voice startled her to wakefulness. "I'm sorry," it said, "but I've got to get that ball."

Karen opened her eyes and saw a naked back at her feet. Someone on hands and knees, was reaching beneath the bench on which she sat.

"Got it," the voice said from under the bench. Then the back straightened and Karen found herself staring into the handsome,

smiling face of John Vavaris.

At the time Karen knew John Vavaris by sight and reputation, but was not a friend. He had only been in Parkview for a year, having transferred from another school in the East End of the city, and had not been in any of Karen's classes. She knew him, as the whole school knew him, because he had quickly become the most popular boy in Parkview. He had already proven himself the school's best athlete in soccer and basketball, was a marvelous dancer, and had easily charmed half the girls at Parkview into humble adoration.

"Thanks," John Vavaris said.

"What for?" Karen inquired as she watched his face turn very serious.

"For stopping the ball before it went out on the street," he said without moving his own dark eyes from her light blue ones.

"I didn't stop the ball," she said. "I didn't even see it." She was almost embarrassed now that she hadn't when he seemed so earnestly to think she had.

"Of course you did," John insisted. "When the ball saw you sitting on the bench looking as great as you do, it just had to stop for a closer look." His face resumed its wide friendly smile and Karen understood that he had set her up quite nicely for the compliment.

There were sudden jeers and catcalls from the other boys on the field, and Vavaris turned and yelled at them to shut up.

"Those guys don't know a good thing when they see it," he said warmly to Karen.

Still on his knees he turned and threw the others the ball. Karen watched the sudden movement of the hard muscles in his back and shoulders, and saw the sun glisten on the faint film of sweat that covered his olive skin. He turned back to Karen and looked solemnly into her eyes. "My name is John--John Vavaris. You're Karen, aren't you?"

Karen was both surprised and pleased that he had known her name. "How do you know my name?" she asked.

"I made it my business to know your name, Karen Hudak--and that's why I know it. Any other questions?"

How would you like to kiss me? Karen thought to herself. Aloud she said: "No other questions, your honor. The witness is free to go."

"Well I have a question if you don't," Vavaris responded, placing a hand on her knee. "How would you like to go over to Dusty's after school for a cup of coffee?"

For a moment Karen hesitated. Of course she would like to go. What girl wouldn't? Only her mother would be waiting. She liked Karen to be home right after school. Aunt Maggie would sometimes drop by to look in, but all too often her mother spent her days alone in their small aptment on de Bullion Street. Still...John Vavaris had just asked her out. John Vavaris, the best-looking and most popular boy in Parkview. This might be her



big chance--her only chance--and if she refused now he might never ask again. It wasn't as if he was desperate or anything. And if she accepted--well--who could tell?

"I could only come for a little while," she said slowly.

"Hey--that's great!" Vavaris rejoiced. "I'll meet you in the basement right after school."

Karen watched as he jogged back to his friends on the soccer field. He ran easily, with the careless grace that is bred of the subtle union of instinct and self-assurance. Karen was no longer tired and no longer bored. Her heart was still hammering. The sun shone even brighter than before and she could have yelled at the top of her voice for the joy of it all. This was her day. Her lucky, lucky day.

At 3:30 that afternoon, Karen and John and several others occupied two booths in Dusty's restaurant. Dusty's, unlike the corner snack bars surrounding Parkview, was a full-fledged restaurant that catered to a largely adult clientele. Vavaris and a few others in his group frequently gathered there after school for pizza and beer.

Karen knew the people who had come to Dusty's along with her and Vavaris, but had never had much social contact with them before. They were part of Parkview's reigning clique, and not counted among her friends. She knew that academically none of the people here--including John Vavaris--could come close to matching her

record, and that most of them in fact, were in some danger of losing their year through poor grades.

Their academic failings however, did not prevent them from ruling the social roost at P.H.S. They ran the student council, and organized most of the student activities and dances.

Karen's own friends were among the less obvious, less organized, and more timid academic students who occupied the clubs and intramural activities at Parkview, shunning the political elements of school almost entirely, and acknowledging the wide and irrevocable schism between the two groups.

Karen sipped at her coffee. She felt uneasy. John had been amusing and flattering as they walked through Fletcher's Field to Mont-Royal Avenue, and then to Dusty's restaurant on Park. He asked why they hadn't gotten to know one another sooner, and when Karen declared him responsible he claimed that he must have been suffering from a touch of lingering snow blindness for letting her escape for so long. She had bantered back, suggesting he buy a pair of sunglasses--"the better to see you with my dear"--giving, she felt, as good as she got.

But here in the restaurant Vavaris had spent most of his time fending off the somewhat crude and jesting remarks concerning her presence that his friends apparently found so amusing. Whenever she caught his eye he would shrug his shoulders helplessly while the others continued to warn Karen of his unsavory character, and his unbridled delight in ravishing anything remotely female.

"I've heard he's so afraid of going fag that he'll check a chicken between the legs before he eats it," Peter Malinakis said to Karen while closely watching her reaction. Malinakis was a large, dark-skinned boy with an oily face and close-cropped black hair. He was known in the school for his size and his quick temper.

"I thought all chickens were female," Karen answered quickly. She knew she was being tested and she was playing the game.

"They are," Vavaris grinned. "Only Malinakis hasn't learned how to tell the difference--he's failed biology twice already!" Everyone laughed except Malinakis.

Karen glanced at her watch. "Well, it has been delightful guys, but I've got to go."

"But we only just got here," Vavaris moaned, a mock pout forming on his lips.

"My mother will kill me if I'm any later than this," Karen insisted. "In fact she's going to kill me already."

"Do we let her go without a goodbye kiss?" Malinakis asked deliberately. "There's only six of us."

"Cut the crap, Malinakis," Vavaris said. "She doesn't kiss anybody but me. Isn't that right, Karen?"

Karen smiled. "If I don't get home in the next few minutes my head will be too bruised to kiss anybody."

Malinakis rudely flicked out his tongue. "I'll kiss your bruises baby--anytime--anywhere!"

"Oh Jesus! We're surrounded by pigs in here," Vavaris moaned.

"Bring a girl for a quiet cup of coffee and she ends up in Noah's Ark. Dusty better sweep out this barn or we'll need shovels to get in."

He walked Karen to the door. "Don't mind those guys, they're really okay. They're just putting on their animal act to see how you take it."

"Oh, don't worry. I don't mind. One has to pity the beasts of the field. It's in the Bible, you know."

"Well just don't mention that to them," Vavaris chided. "They'll just say--'If God didn't want us to be animals he wouldn't have put it in the Bible.'" They both laughed at John's imitation of Malinakis' husky voice.

"Heaven forbid they should learn to quote the Bible," Karen groaned in exaggerated horror. "I promise I won't say a word."

"Then we're secret partners, agreed?"

"Agreed."

"Then I'll see you tomorrow--partner?"

"I'll be around. Keep those sunglasses handy."

And she was around. Vavaris made sure of that. He began to meet her for lunch and to walk her home after school, careful for Karen's sake that her mother didn't see them together.

Karen began to feel like his girl. His friends quickly accepted her--although the girls in the group remained aloof and distant--as she was bright and pretty and new blood for the clique.

Karen's own friends, surprised and alarmed and finally hurt as she began to drift away from them, began to avoid her. Only Elena Giannopoulos forgave her and remained close to Karen, although Elena wanted nothing to do with Vavaris and his friends herself.

Karen began to spend more and more of her time in Vavaris' company. Several times she skipped afternoon classes and met him in the park. Once, after a school dance, she had gone out with Vavaris until 1:00 in the morning. Her mother had been desperate with worry, had called the school and received no answer, had almost called the police. It was then that Karen began to lie.

"My God!! Oh, my God--where have you been?--Where have you been?" her mother had cried out.

"Oh momma, I'm sorry. We all--the girls--went out to eat after the dance. I forgot--I forgot the time. I'm sorry. It won't happen ever again. I promise--I promise, momma."

"I called the school--I was frantic. The police--I wanted to call--how could you do this--frighten me!"

"Momma, I didn't--"

"You won't get away with this my girl. You won't get away with it! That's the last time--the last time you go to a dance. The last time you get out. I've had enough. It's hard enough to get by without--without...."

"Momma please, I just forgot--please don't cry--please momma."

"I try my best. I try...so hard. And you...and you...."

Karen began to cry, her tears matching those of her mother.

She had caused her mother pain, and worse, she had lied. She had piled guilt upon guilt, and she had locked and barred the door of her return. The lie would not undo itself. The truth, now, could never be revealed, as the wound of its sharp edge would cut a dozen times more deeply than the one she had already inflicted. She had stepped on a treadmill and found it an endless road.

Even Karen's teachers began to notice the change in her. She could no longer work as hard as she once did, and her grades began to slip. She was preoccupied and restless, and her concentration was poor. On several occasions she was caught without her homework assignments, and although it was not made an issue--only because of her excellent past record--her transformation, a change that to others seemed to happen overnight, was a recurring subject of staffroom discussion.

In a school the size of Parkview new relationships were not long hidden or disguised, and Karen's teachers were soon aware of her growing attachment to John Vavaris.

Judgement was quickly passed. The relationship was deemed a disaster. All that was so evidently negative was there for others to see. They were witness to the change in Karen, and to their own dismay in that change. What they could not see, and what she herself could not reveal because it was beyond the grasp of her consciousness, was the joy and confusion and love and despair that struggled in Karen Hudak's being. She had been a

girl, and now she was a woman.

For some that inevitable process is clear and predictable, a series of careful steps on a path free of the unexpected, protected somehow from pitfalls and deviations, a straight line A to Z, with regular stops and appropriate signals and a destination fully dreamt of, built, and mortgaged well in advance.

But not for Karen. Her change was sudden and blinding and it caught her unaware. One moment--one heartbeat--it had all been there, sure and steady and inevitable. And the next it had disappeared, ashes in the wind

Blame it on Love some would say. But she had been in love before--or at least she had called it love. It had felt like this--the sweeping endless energy--but not quite like this. This was new. Along with the old feelings had come a confusing wave of new ones, each filled with its own intolerable, wicked, glorious pain.

It swept her along. No moth on the edge of light had felt more helpless. No moth beating its wings on a burning flame had welcomed more its final flickering caress than Karen welcomed the bright embrace of her emotions. There was no time for questions, no need to understand it all. It simply was.

Her teachers communally hoped the affair would briefly burn and then die out, the familiar pattern they witnessed time and again. They had their own faith in Karen. Faith in what she had been before, and in her inevitable return. They shook their heads

in disbelief when the affair continued. When it survived the last hectic weeks of class and the painful month of final exams. And they knew it had survived because Karen's grade average fell ten-percent.

It was summer, that finally brought a change for John and Karen. It was not an ending, but a small separation--a new situation--brought about by the circumstances of their summer lives.

Through the efforts of his cousin, Vavaris got a job as a busboy at Danny's, a bustling downtown steakhouse. He worked long, hard hours, six nights a week, but gladly stuck it out for the money it put in his pocket.

Karen's mother, disappointed in her daughter's marks and puzzled by the teachers' comments on Karen's report, kept the promise she had made the night Karen had been so late coming home from the dance and grounded her daughter for the summer. It was then Karen had thought of dropping out of school and getting a full-time job. She didn't want to leave school, but at the time it seemed so much more useful than just sitting in a classroom. It would mean more money and an easier time for both of them. And perhaps it would begin to make up to her mother for the disappointment she had brought her.

Yet when she had hesitantly suggested the idea, her mother had refused to even consider it, and had tearfully insisted that



Karen graduate and find work that was suitable and rewarding; something that would take her away from de Bullion Street and the run-down neighbourhood, something that would let her find a nice young man with a good job.

After the first few days of summer vacation, surrounded by her mother's disappointment and the distance it wedged between them, Karen grew bored and begged her mother to let her apply for the summer job in the dress store. Her mother had at first been reluctant, but because the job was in the neighbourhood, and on the condition that Karen promise to come home immediately after work each day, she had finally relented.

So the summer went its way, and Karen lived her anxious days at the store and her quiet evenings at home, spending most of her time sitting on the small front balcony of their cold-water flat, or watching television until her eyes drooped and her mother told her to go to bed.

Nothing changed until the middle of August when John Vavaris lost his job. He had begun to flirt with the cashier at the steakhouse, and she in turn had responded to his attention. The cashier's boyfriend, a waiter in the same restaurant, had not taken kindly to Vavaris' attentions. After warning him several times to back off, and after having the warnings ignored, he attacked and fought Vavaris in the steakhouse basement. It had been the waiter who had provoked the fight, but good waiters are hard to find. Busboys on the other hand, are more common, and Vavaris was

fired.

He didn't really mind losing the job--by then he had enough money to see him through the rest of the summer, and he had come to hate the work. But his pride had been hurt because he felt the waiter was at fault for the fight, and yet they had accepted the bastard's lies before his own word. As he left the restaurant for the last time, still bitter and angry, he planned his revenge.

Without the job taking up most of his time, Vavaris was also free to pick up the strings he had tied to Karen Hudak; strings that had fallen all too loose over the summer. Of course, it hadn't happened on purpose. Karen had worked days, and he had worked nights. He had called several times, but her mother had always answered the phone in her bitchy unfriendly way, and had twice told him that Karen was too busy to come to the phone.

He had let it go at that, amusing himself instead with the cashier at work and with the girls who gathered at Dusty's during the day and on weekends; unconcerned with a relationship he knew would quickly start again with school in September.

Now he didn't have to wait. He dropped in at the dress store and took Karen to lunch. Later he returned and walked her home. A few days later Karen called in sick and met him in the park. They had walked downtown, gone to lunch in a brasserie, window shopped the department stores along Saint Catherine Street. And then John had brought her back to the apartment.

Karen had heard stories that some Parkview students had an

apartment of their own, but John had not mentioned it before, and like most rumors it had always been a story without proof or substance. Now it became a reality.

"Why didn't you tell me about this?" she demanded, looking curiously around the apartment.

"Hey--hey! Hold on tiger. I would have told you, only I just got in on it myself. The rent is shared by a bunch of guys--old Parkview students--graduates--and when a couple of guys copped out they needed new members, and they asked Malinakis and me. I've only been in on it a couple of weeks."

"Aren't other Parkview kids in on it? I heard--"

"What you heard is bullshit," Vavaris cut in. "They don't want kids in on it. Too much trouble. They asked us--Malkie and me--'cause they know we're okay, and that we can get the money together."

"But who lives here?"

"Nobody lives here, dum-dum. We just keep it for parties and things--or say a guy gets kicked out of the house by his old man or something."

"And nobody knows about it?"

"Only the guys, and a few others--like you, now."

"I'm impressed," Karen said with a smile. "And here I thought you guys were all talk."

"Vavaris grinned. "Baby, you ain't seen the half of it."

It was a small apartment on Park Avenue, not far from Dusty's

restaurant. The building was not old, but it had been poorly constructed and had the neglected look of shoddy buildings that age before their time. All of the apartments were one-and-a-half rooms, furnished, and rented by the month without a lease. The building was owned by the uncle of someone in the group, and as long as the rent was paid on time he had no complaints as to how and by whom it was occupied.

The word furnished in the For Rent sign that was a permanent fixture on the outside wall of the building meant that each small apartment had a convertible bed that folded down from the worn, imitation-leather couch, a small metal and formica table with two folding metal chairs that stood by the kitchen alcove, a floor lamp with a plastic shade, a small refrigerator placed by the door, and a two-burner hotplate.

Overhead was a bare lightbulb, and a door in the corner of the room led to a small bathroom that had a toilet, sink and shower stall, but no bathtub.

Vavaris and Karen sat on the couch and he drew her closer. They kissed, and she felt the warmth of his lips.

Suddenly she pulled away. "Johnny, someone might walk in!"

"No sweat, baby," Vavaris answered. "We got a system here." He walked to the kitchen alcove and opened the narrow cupboard above the sink. Except for a half-filled bottle of vodka and several glasses, the cupboard was bare. Vavaris reached behind the bottle and pulled out a wrinkled blue and gold necktie. He

went to the door of the apartment, opened it, and wrapped the tie around the outside doorknob.

"It's a signal," he explained. "When anybody sees this they know someone's in here and they knock before they barge in. But anyway, everybody's at work. Nobody comes around until later --after dinner maybe." He walked to the refrigerator and took out a bottle of orange juice. Then he got the vodka and two glasses.

"Want a drink?" he asked Karen.

"Okay--but not too much--I'm not used to it."

Vavaris measured the shots by eye and filled the glasses with orange juice. "Here's to bumming work," he said, lifting his glass in a toast.

"Down the hatch," Karen responded.

"Skol," said Vavaris.

"Here's mud in your eye," Karen said.

"Cheers--"

"Bottoms up--"

"First today--"

"Prosit--"

"Hey, a foreign language--no fair!" Vavaris protested.

"And what do you think skol is dum-dum? A four-letter English word?"

"Okay--okay! you win," Vavaris laughed.

"I know," Karen said, smiling brightly. "And I don't want

you to forget it." Again she lifted her glass. "Well, down the hatch!"

"Oh don't start that again, you devil!" Vavaris groaned.

They laughed together and drank the first drink quickly. Karen made a sour face.

"Whooooee---if that's a little bit of booze, I'd hate to taste a whole lot!"

Vavaris took their glasses for a re-fill. "I'll put less in this one," he said, flashing his most charming smile.

Karen was already beginning to feel the effects of the alcohol. Hours had passed since they had lunched at the brasserie, and the vodka found its way to an empty stomach. She felt a strange light-headedness begin to overtake her. "I think I'm getting drunk!" she exclaimed.

"Already? That's impossible," Vavaris said as he filled their glasses. "It hasn't been long enough for the booze to reach your brain."

"Well, it reached my brain already," Karen insisted, "'cause there ain't much brain to reach." She took the drink Vavaris held out to her and sipped it. "You know, the second one tastes a lot better than the first."

"That's the way it is," Vavaris said as he watched her drink again.

When he reached for her a short time later, Karen was ready. In her mind she knew what was happening--what was about to happen--

and she was not afraid. Now, with the help of the alcohol in her bloodstream, she was free of the doubt and guilt that kept her from the pleasures provided by her own body. At night, in her room, in her bed, she had explored her own body and learned its pleasing secrets. But this was more--this was a sharing--a giving and taking of love.

She felt John unbutton her blouse and slip his hand beneath the sheeriness of her bra. His hands, at first, felt rough and cold, but her mind drifted softly in its alcoholic bath, floating gently in and out of what was happening to her body. She giggled softly. John's breathing was quick and heavy, and it tickled her ear.

The hands on her breasts grew warm, and the nipples grew hard under their caress. She shrugged her shoulders to help remove her blouse, and waited while the hands fumbled with the hook on her bra. Then her breasts were free and lips were kissing them. She could feel the cold and warmth of each breath on her skin, and a soft sound escaped her lips. This was how it should be, she thought, the words battling with the pure sensation that sought to engulf her mind. No pain, no worry--just the pleasure of being held and wanted.

A hand moved beneath her skirt and up her thigh, touching the damp patch on her panties. A finger slipped beneath the elastic edge and made its slow, inexorable way within her. Now John's quickened breath was no more than an echo of her own, and

her mind centered on the pulse of pleasure that filled her.

She felt her skirt being pushed above her hips, and her panties sliding down past her knees, past her ankles. "Hurry Johnny," she whispered.

Then her legs were roughly pushed apart and he was on her, crushing her with his sudden weight. His hard manhood pushed inside her, piercing her virginity and filling her with a sharp, continuing pain.

"Johnny, it hurts--it hurts," she had moaned, surprised by his fierceness, shocked by the size of his penis as it battered inside her. "Oh...stop--stop--" she groaned.

"Not now," he said harshly. "It'll stop hurting!"

But it didn't stop, and she was relieved when his warm sperm pulsed inside her and he groaned and pulled out of her and rolled onto his side.

"I'm sorry I came inside you," he said after a minute. "I just couldn't help myself."

It was then Karen realized fully what had happened. He had reached his orgasm inside her, and even now she might be pregnant.

"My God!" she whispered. "What should I do?"

"Do?" Vavaris asked before he realized what she meant. "Oh that! Look--don't worry about it. It isn't easy to get pregnant. Just go in the bathroom and wash yourself out. It'll be okay--don't worry about it--I'm a lucky guy!"

Karen made her way to the bathroom. She walked unsteadily,



42

kicking over the empty vodka bottle, the alcohol in her blood making the room twist and whirl. There was a burning itch in her vagina, and she wanted to urinate, but was afraid it would make the pain worse.

She closed the bathroom door and sat on the toilet. How could she wash herself? She looked around the bathroom but it was empty. There was one soiled towel on a hook behind the door. She stood, gripping the sink to steady herself. She twisted the taps until she felt warm water running into the sink. Then, seeing a small bar of soap on a dish by the tap, she lathered her right hand while her left held tightly to the edge of the mirror.

"Hey--guess what?" Vavaris called from the other room. "No blood on the couch."

Karen didn't answer, and when her hand was covered with soap she lifted her right knee onto the toilet and began to wash herself.

You have to go inside, she thought. You have to wash it out! But when she touched herself pain swept over her, and with it a moment of nausea. She slowly sank to the cold tile floor of the bathroom as her stomach gagged, and the bitter remnants of alcohol wrenched itself from her stomach.

When Vavaris opened the bathroom door she was still lying on the floor, not asleep, but not fully conscious.

"My God!" he said, looking at her. Her genitals were covered with drying soap. The toilet had puke in it. "A little too much

to drink, babe?" he asked mockingly, his head shaking in amazement.

"They sure don't make virgins like they used to."

Against her mumbled protests he moved her from the bathroom to the couch and helped her dress. She began to cry, softly and quietly.

"You stay right where you are while I run to Dusty's and get you a cup of coffee," Vavaris said. "Lots of coffee, in fact. We got to sober you up real quick."

He lay her down on the couch. "I'll be right back--don't go 'way." He smiled at his own joke. She couldn't go anywhere if she wanted to. Dumb broad. They never knew how to handle themselves.

Karen sobbed quietly. What had she done? She was so sick--so tired. If she could just sleep for a little while. With a last stifled sob she closed her eyes....

An alarm jangled suddenly and harshly in Karen's ear, and she realized with a start that she was home in bed, on the first day of school, and that she had been lost in painful memory.

What was she anyway? she thought in sudden panic. Who was she? What did she want of herself?

When John had brought her home that day, still unsteady and feeling ill, but filled with enough black coffee to let her function, she had been too ashamed to meet her mother's eyes, had told her that she was sick--that it might be a cold coming on--and had gone quickly to bed without eating.

She had lost her virginity--given it on a couch in a dingy room while she was drunk--and her mother didn't even suspect her, had no idea what she was really like. Trusted her to stay out of trouble and live the way she had been brought up to live. And Karen could never tell her. She would have to live with it by herself. Live with the memories and the shame because she was not what her mother wanted her to be.

She felt things that her mother would not understand and had desires she could not deny, longings to be held and touched, longings that had led her to John Vavaris whose hands had touched her breasts and searched out her secret parts, whose lips had covered her with small ticklish sensations of pleasure, and whose eager manhood had filled her not only with pain--a pain that seemed more and more remote as time passed--but with a strange satisfaction as well--a fulfillment that had replaced the years of fantasy that had lead to that moment. The strange sensation of possession and surrender; a feeling that confused her, but had become, in its own way, greater than the pain, greater than the sticky vinyl couch and the sickness that had overcome her. She had grown up. She was a woman.

As she lay in bed thinking, Karen's hands ran across and down her body. Her fingers stopped when she reached the warm, familiar place that responded so fiercely to her touch. Her breath quickened and her heart beat loudly in her ears. There was no thought of shame now.

"Oh God, Johnny," she whispered as her fingers did their practiced work, and her hips moved to their steady rhythm. "Don't stop! Please don't ever stop!"

John Vavaris was running hard. His feet pounded the still-damp grass, and sweat rolled from his forehead across his cheeks. He turned the last corner of the yard and sprinted a final hundred meters to an imaginary finish line. His breath was ragged as he sucked air into his tired lungs, and his knees pumped higher as he moved up on his toes and stretched for the finish.

He slowed to a jog and breathed deeply to recover. Another morning run was over. It was the only way to stay in shape. He was grateful that the elementary school with the yard was so close to his house on Waverly Street, and grateful again that the yard was partly grassed and large enough to let him build up speed for a good run. Running made him feel good. When he ran he was aware only of his body, and the strength and power of his youthfulness.

He jogged slowly back to the house, enjoying the early morning quiet that still gripped the city streets, and aware of the warm, slanting rays of the sun that pressed against his back.

He took the stairs leading to his family's second-floor flat two at a time, and used the key he had pinned to his running shorts to let himself in. It was still early and his parents, as well as his younger brother and sisters, would still be asleep.

Quietly he went into the bathroom and peeled off his damp

clothes. He turned towards the door and looked at himself in the full-length mirror his father had nailed to the wall. What he saw pleased him. His face was narrow and darkly handsome, framed by thick, dark hair. His eyes were large and boyish, his smile broad and radiant.

He had often compared his own face with pictures he had found in encyclopedias--pictures of ancient Greeks and Romans. He had often thought with pleasure how much he resembled those classic forms. But while they were only cold, grey marble, he was warm and alive.

He looked down at his body, trim and muscular at five-ten and one-hundred and sixty pounds. He worked hard to keep fit. Running, lifting weights--and he was a talented athlete. One day he would be a pro, and his talents would make him rich. Then they would all know John Vavaris. With his looks and his talent--he would show them--he would own the world!

He swung around and watched the line of his buttocks as he shifted his weight from one leg to the other. Beautiful, he thought. No wonder chicks like Karen pulled down their pants when he snapped his fingers. It gets them every time. He swung again and this time faced his reflection on the glass. He grabbed his penis, holding it in one hand. They love it, he said silently to the mirror. They just love it.

Someone knocked noisily on the bathroom door, and Vavaris, startled, quickly pulled his hand away from his groin.

"Hurry up, will ya, I gotta piss," his father yelled from the other side of the door.

"Okay, okay! Hold your horses," Vavaris shouted back.

At 8:15 Vavaris caught the Park Avenue bus and rode it to the Mont-Royal stop. The bus was crowded, filled with students from several schools and with the morning commuters--secretaries and salesclerks--making their way to their nine o'clock jobs.

He flashed the driver his bus pass, dropped in his dime fare, and reached for the handrail above his head. He wouldn't try to make his way to the back of the bus--it was too much trouble. He would just stay where he was and let other people getting on push past him.

In idle curiosity his eyes roved through the crowd of commuters for someone he recognized.. In a few seconds he spotted Elena Giannopoulos. She was seated on one of the single seats that line the mid-section of city buses, absently gazing out of the window. Vavaris turned his head. He knew she was a friend of Karen's, and had spoken to her a few times the previous spring when he and Karen had started spending time together, but they had never said more than a few words and he didn't want to talk to her now.

Vavaris knew Elena didn't like him. She always acted as if he wasn't worth her time. There were a few people like that around, and most of them were like Elena--smart, stuck-up broads who got

A-plus in every subject and who spent their whole boring lives creeping around with books under their arms.

He could make her change her tune if he wanted to--she wasn't bad looking, he admitted that--but why would he want to? She had those cold, hard eyes that seemed to go right through you, and that lousy Greek morality that kept girls like her chained to mommy's apron until Prince Charming came riding along on his white horse with a diamond wedding ring, ready to give them their own little castle in the ghetto where they could live unhappily ever after. He preferred girls who knew where it was at. Girls like Karen Hudak, and the cashier at Danny's Steakhouse, Suzanne Lessard.

His affair with Suzanne had pleased him, and he smiled when he thought of it. She had been instrumental in his revenge on the restaurant that had fired him, and on the fool waiter who had been to blame. He remembered with pleasure the beating he had given the waiter in the fight, his fist smashing into the soft pulp of the fool's bleeding nose, his triumph as the man slid helplessly to the floor, groaning in pain.

But then they had fired him--and he was innocent, had only defended himself--and kept on the no-good, bastard waiter. But he had repaid them all. His was the last laugh.

It had been easy. It had only taken a phone call to Suzanne to arrange the date. She had been waiting for him to call. She was sorry he had been fired because of her, and wanted to make

it up to him. They had gone to a movie and then he had taken her back to the apartment. He had screwed her, and when he had finished he had kicked her out. She had grown angry when he refused to return her panties, but he had only laughed and slapped her and pushed her out of the apartment. Then he had taken the panties and wrapped them in a small gift box along with a quick letter he had written explaining in detail his evening with Suzanne. Within an hour the box addressed to her boyfriend, the waiter, had been stamped and mailed. Vavaris hoped the bastard had enjoyed his gift.

Later that same night he had completed his revenge. He had gone down to the steakhouse just before dawn when the streets were most deserted, with a brick wrapped in a paper bag. The brick had gone through the plate glass window, shattering it completely and setting off the shrill alarms. He had smiled all the way home. They would learn not to mess with John Vavaris....

The bus lurched to a stop at a red light and Vavaris looked out the window. They were getting close to Parkview and there were a lot of kids walking to school. It seemed strange to see so many of them out on the street so early in the morning.

The sudden sight of a small triangular yellow flag moving past the window of the bus drew Vavaris' attention. He leaned closer to the open window. The moving flag was attached to a thin metal pole on a bicycle, and he knew only one person who rode an old bike with a yellow flag. Vavaris leaned out the open window....



Elena Giannopoulos sat contentedly on her seat in the crowded bus. She gazed out the window and smiled to herself. It was so nice to see the street filled with students on their way to school because it meant that her senior year had begun and her lonely summer had come to an end at last. For Elena, the bus trip to Parkview was a long one, but today she didn't mind at all; the noisy, crowded bus only adding to her excitement.

The previous June, after years of saving, her father had bought a new, two-family duplex in New Bordeaux, a sprawling suburban development in Montreal's North End.

The move meant that Elena now had to take three different buses to reach Parkview High, and although the trip took more than an hour each way, she was not complaining. At first her parents had wanted her to transfer to a school closer to home, but she had pleaded with them to let her finish at Parkview and graduate with her friends. They had refused at first, but when Elena began to hint that her grades might suffer in the unfamiliar environment of a new school, they had been concerned enough to finally relent. Elena was one of Parkview's best students. She could very well graduate at the top of her class. Her parents didn't want that pleasing possibility to be wasted.

Elena spent the summer sitting at home. Both her parents worked, and she was left with the responsibility of doing the housework and caring for her younger brother. It made it impossible for her to get away, and New Bordeaux was too far from the Parkview

neighbourhood for many of her friends to make casual visits.

She had talked to Karen Hudak and a few others on the telephone, but that didn't remove the edge of loneliness that served to make her depressed and lethargic.

But school would change all that. School gave her a chance to be with people, to fill her time at home with homework and study, tasks that gave her a sense of purpose and satisfaction lacking in other areas of her life. And best of all, school would let her see Mr. Chambers again.

As Elena gazed out of the window of the bus she thought of Stephen Chambers. She had always found him handsome. Even when she was only in grade eight and he had been her first English teacher, even then she had considered him the most attractive of her teachers and often wondered what kind of person he might possibly fall in love with.

She could see his face now, in her imagination, as clearly as if he stood before her. His rugged features and blue eyes and straight blond hair parted carefully on one side. The two of them were so different. She thought of herself as dark-skinned and dark-haired, with eyebrows that were too full and legs that were too short, while he was tall and fair and handsome.

Of course, she thought, as the image of Stephen Chambers faded from her mind, I may be prejudiced. After all, I suffer the symptoms of a classic infatuation. Sometimes I almost fall over when he talks to me. Oh Lord, I hope I'm in his class this

year. Oh God--I don't ask much of you--but please God, if you're listening--let me be in Stephen's class....

In the corner of her eye Elena saw the flicker of a small yellow flag and broke off her silent monologue. It was Bobby Bower on his fancy bicycle. Elena smiled. She knew Bobby fairly well. They had been in a number of classes together during the last three years. Bobby wasn't like most of the other boys his age. Bobby was--different somehow. Often he was the happy clown on his own comic stage, and other times he would be quiet and withdrawn, a little Chaplin on the edge of pathos. Elena felt that Bobby liked her. A lot of signs were there. He had always been sweet and kind to her, and she had sometimes caught him staring when he thought she wouldn't notice.

It was the sight of Bobby Bower that reminded Elena that twice over the summer the postman had delivered letters addressed to her. The letters contained typewritten love poetry--very sad and very romantic--and both times the letters had been unsigned. Elena had read them curiously, but had thrown them away. She was afraid that her parents might find them and think she was involved with someone without their knowledge. She didn't want that to happen, even if it wasn't true. Her parents would--she didn't know what they would do, and she didn't want to find out.

Now, seeing Bobby, Elena wished she still had the letters. Perhaps if she could re-read them she would find some hint as to their author. For a moment she wondered if the anonymous poet

could possibly have been Bobby Bower.

Bobby pedaled his bike furiously as he beat the light at Laurier Avenue. A car pulled out suddenly on the far side of the intersection, and Bobby braked hard to avoid a collision. As the car sped away, its tires squeeling on the road, Bobby beeped the large plastic horn on his handlebar and shouted angrily at the careless driver: "You damned stupid nut!"

Once he had gained momentum, Bobby didn't like to stop unless it was absolutely necessary. His bike, decorated with flags and bells and reflectors and saddlebags, was an old American Raleigh, a heavy, fat-tired bike that was old-fashioned and ungainly to look at, but strongly-built and dependable. Now that the car had forced him to brake, he would have to build up speed again--standing up on his pedals and pushing hard, the sweat of his exertion dampening the edges of his unruly hair and trickling down his ribcage.

It had been a bad morning for Bobby. Everything had gone wrong from the start. Over the years he had developed the habit of waking when his step-father got up for work at 6:30. He would lie in bed awake and waiting until the old man left the house, then he would dress and eat quickly and leave for school, often arriving at the door as early as 7:30 when the school was still empty.

Even in summer when school was closed, Bobby would wake with the faint tingling of the alarm in his parent's bedroom, and would

be out on the street, riding his bike or walking the neighbourhood before 8:00 a.m.

But this morning, the very first day of his senior year, Bobby had overslept. He had woken, as usual, with the distant sound of his parent's alarm as it broke the morning stillness. Then he had heard his mother's voice, scratched and shrill even in its whispered undertone, and he had known what was coming. It was a familiar scene. His mother's voice would continue its hushed and monotonous whine until his step-father's deeper, raspy growl would finally respond. Then the voices would skirmish, the words like bullets fired back and forth between the lines. It would end with his step-father's heavy steps retreating down the narrow hallway of their flat, and the loud slamming of the front door as he left the house. Then there would be only silence, or the stifled sobbing of his mother's tears.

That particular day, as the argument began, Bobby had covered his head with a pillow to block out the voices and quickly began to count numbers in his head. The numbers evolved into a strange stick-like group of figures that danced and weaved their way through his mind, and somehow, quite unlike himself, he had fallen back to sleep.

Perhaps it was a dream that woke him the second time, or perhaps it was just the silence that had settled on the house soon after his step-father had left for work, but suddenly Bobby bolted up, his heart pounding, confused and startled by the fact that he

had been sleeping. He looked frantically at the time on his bedside clock. He was later than usual, but there was still time to reach school before most of the other students. That was important today. He wanted to give Miss Arianakis her present without anyone else around to laugh or make fun of him. He dressed hurriedly and decided not to eat. He was making his way to the door when he anxiously remembered he had not fed Herman. Stamping his foot, Bobby rushed back to his room. Even today, late and in a rush, Bobby could not leave Herman unfed. Quickly he took the large, green toad from the homemade cage by his bed and began to feed it the flies he kept in a jar by the windowsill. His mother, her crying subdued, came out of her bedroom and stood by his open door.

"You're late this morning," she said in a small voice. It was a statement not a question, and Bobby didn't answer. "Did you eat?" she asked. "You got to eat, Bobby. You can't go all day without eating."

Bobby looked at his mother in exasperation. She was a small woman, with watery eyes and dry, wheat-colored hair like his own.

"Mommy--I ate--please don't worry."

"I didn't hear you in the kitchen."

"I ate--I ate," Bobby repeated, his voice rising sharply.

"You don't have to shout, Bobby. You're getting to be as bad as your father."

"He's not my father," Bobby said sullenly.

"We won't go into that again, but he is your father because I made the mistake of marrying him. You never had a real father. He was gone before you were old enough to recognize him."

Bobby turned his attention back to the toad. He knew where the conversation was leading and he had no time for it this morning.

"Do you have to keep that horrid thing?" his mother demanded.

Bobby didn't answer. One of his mother's greatest threats was Herman's eviction from the house.

"Is that what you plan to wear to school today?" she asked, pointing a thin finger at the creased blue sweatshirt Bobby was wearing with his dark chino trousers.

"Ahh, mommy--" Bobby whined.

"Put on your new shirt. The short-sleeved one that you got for your birthday. It looks so nice on you. You don't want to look a mess on your first day of school."

"But I wear this sweatshirt all the time," Bobby insisted.

"Not on the first day. You want to look neat and handsome on the first day."

She went to the cupboard and took out the short-sleeved shirt. It was pale mauve with tiny carnations dotting the surface like small white clouds in an evening sky. "Your aunt Ethel will be pleased when I tell her you've been wearing the shirt she gave you for your birthday."

Bobby clenched his teeth and stood up quickly, pulling off the

sweatshirt in one angry motion.

"You're a good boy, Bobby," his mother said, reaching to stroke his hair. "You're not like him at all. You've always been a good boy."

Bobby grunted at his mother's back as she left the room and kicked at the sweatshirt he had dropped to the floor. As it slid under the bed, Bobby remembered Herman. He had left the toad on the floor when he got up to change his shirt. Now it was gone.

He began a frantic search. If his mother saw Herman leaping around the house it would be the certain end of one or both of them. His mother heard his moans and protestations and returned to his room.

"Bobby, what are you looking for?"

He dropped his eyes to the floor. "I've lost Herman," he muttered. "He got away."

"Bobby you find that filthy thing, do you hear me?" his mother half-shouted. "I don't know what possessed me to let you keep it in the first place."

She stood cautiously in the doorway while Bobby looked for his toad. Ten minutes later he found it, tucked inside one of the winter boots he had stored on the floor of his cupboard.

"Herman, you're not nice!" Bobby yelled, shaking the toad in his hand.

"Bobby you stop that!" his mother ordered, startled by her son's burst of anger.



"Now I'm really going to be late--late--late!" Bobby shouted as he tossed the toad into its cage. He grabbed the small bouquet of yellow jonquils from the plastic water vase on his bureau, and wrapping them in newspaper placed them carefully in the nylon packsack he carried to school on his back.

"Your teacher will like the flowers, Bobby" his mother said as she watched his hurried packing. "Don't worry, you still got time."

Bobby knew he wouldn't be late for school, but he knew as well that he would be too late to beat the rush of students into Parkview, and that they would not be alone when he gave Miss Arianakis the flowers. The thought of the others watching him while he gave her the bouquet embarrassed him....

He pushed down hard on the thick pedals of his bike. Only a few more blocks to travel. Then he saw the light change at the corner, and with a loud moan of despair began to brake the heavy Raleigh. There was nothing he could do. Saint Joseph Boulevard was a busy intersection. He would have to stop, pulling up at the corner beside the bus, and wait for the light to change.

At the light someone called his name. He turned and looked up at the windows of the bus. A face leaned out of one of them. The dark, familiar face of John Vavaris.

"Hey Bobby! What's happening?" Vavaris called out, ignoring the woman who had to lean aside to allow him to speak out the window.

"Hi Johnny," Bobby called, waving to Vavaris.

Vavaris was smiling. "Hey man, why don't you get a horse?"

"This is my horse, can't you see?" Bobby answered. "Giddy-up horsie!" He grabbed the plastic tassles that were attached like reins to the rubber handgrips of his bike, and bounced up and down on the seat of the Raleigh. He made imitation horse noises and Vavaris laughed.

The light changed and the bus began to pull away from the corner. "See you in school, okay Johnny?" Bobby called out hopefully. Vavaris was his friend, and Bobby felt better because Vavaris had said hello to him. Johnny was the greatest guy in Parkview, everyone knew that, and everyone knew they were friends. Now Bobby pedaled his bike even harder.

"Giddy-up!" he yelled aloud.

Chapter two:

The bell rang noisily in the empty corridor and Chambers' grade nine class jumped out of their seats and pushed towards the door.

"Push in your chairs," Chambers hollered over the scrape of desks and the rising tempo of high-pitched voices. Grade nine certainly wasn't what it used to be, although in truth, few things were. Still, it hadn't been so long ago that he had been in school, and in those days students didn't get out of their seats until the teacher dismissed them. Now, the second the bell went it was a wild scramble for the door.

Chambers looked around the empty classroom. The floor was covered with scraps of paper, the desks pushed into long, irregular lines, chairs scattered everywhere, the refuse of a grade nine tornado. He thought of tightening up his discipline, of making the kids sit in their seats and straighten out the chairs and desks before they left the classroom, but he wondered if it was really worth it. Other teachers had tried it, some with success he imagined, but there was a price to pay for everything and this was no exception. It may have made the class dismissal a bit more quiet and orderly, but the kids would have resented it. It was easy for a teacher to forget how important those few minutes between classes were to a student. The kids didn't have all that much time to get to their lockers or go to the bathroom, or find a friend for a little

chatter, or just plain release all that damn energy they had stored up like galvanized batteries during class. A quiet, orderly departure was not worth the cost in public relations. Some teachers didn't give a damn what students thought of them. They taught what they were paid to teach and that was as far as it went. Anything else the kids learned--any growing up they did--well--that was somebody else's business.

Chambers didn't believe it had to be that way. He counted far more on cooperation than authority in reaching--and teaching--his students, and that was why his discipline, or the lack of it, was the way it was, and why it would never change despite his flashes of dismay at the bedraggled classroom.

He opened his desk drawer and reached for the two manila envelopes that had been distributed at the staff meeting the previous day. One contained the list of procedures for that morning--the distribution of forms, the assigning of lockers--and the second, the one he now sought, contained the classlists--computer printouts with the alphabetized names of each student assigned to his different classes.

Chambers scanned the sheets, found the grade eleven, began to trace his finger down the list of names. This was his second of two grade eleven classes. The first was his homeroom class. The homeroom was very ordinary--a class without any problem students, but without any particularly bright students either. He hoped this, his only other senior class, would be a bit more exciting.

He wanted at least one class to stimulate him. The rest of his schedule consisted of two grade nines and a junior drama class. The grade nines, he knew, were next to impossible, the human dynamos to whom books and learning were nature's curse on childhood; and the drama class, although fine in theory, was always composed of the leftovers, that unfortunate group of students who could either not decide on their choice of the one optional course allowed them, or who had encountered conflicts among the original courses they had selected and had been arbitrarily reassigned.

The first time he had taught a drama course, Chambers now recalled, he had polled the fourteen students in the class as to how many had freely chosen drama as their option. Two had. The twelve others--the leftovers--had been placed there by the guidance people because they had nowhere else to go. Needless to say, the class had been less than a Broadway smash.

Checking the class lists was an exciting moment for a teacher at Parkview. The size of the school allowed staff members to meet almost all of the student body in the four years they spent there before graduation, and the lists predicted with almost startling accuracy what kind of year a teacher would have with a particular class. If a class was over-burdened with problem cases or poor students, or simply had too many people to manage comfortably, it led to a flurry of behind-the-scene activity as teachers bartered and traded with guidance counselors and the computer programmer to shift students here and there and create a better balance in terms

of numbers and class quality.

Chambers' finger stopped its quick perusal of the list. It underlined a name--Giannopoulos, Elena. Chambers smiled. It would be a pleasure to have Elena in his class again. He had taught her in grade eight and nine, and although last year she had been in Miss Goodman's class and not his own, he had directed her in the school play and had been charmed by her talent and the sensitivity she had brought to her role.

The play had been about an immigrant family--perhaps, Chambers considered, a family much like her own--and she had played the brave and gentle Aunt Nettie to perfection. He could remember her in those final few moments before the curtain opened, tucking in the last few strands of hair and licking her lower lip in tense anticipation of the opening curtain.

Her make-up, the dark wrinkle lines at the corner of her eyes and the grey tint that had been sprayed on her hair, added years to her age, but did not erase Elena's striking attractiveness or the radiant vitality in her large dark eyes. At that moment Chambers knew he had seen Elena as she would be in thirty years, a proud and handsome woman.

The play had been a great success and Elena its star performer. When the final curtain closed and the audience had taken to its feet in a standing ovation, Chambers knew he had never felt as proud of or as close to a group of students as he did that night.

But beyond that, beyond her dramatic talent, Elena was also

an excellent student. One of Parkview's best. She was a delight to have in any class. Chambers had watched her progress for several years now.

In grade eight he had taught her and she had done remarkably well, but had been terribly shy and quiet. She knew all the answers but never volunteered them. At the time, as well, she was somewhat short and overweight and perhaps, unfortunately, bright enough to realize that she was caught in the ugly-duckling period of her adolescence. Chambers had felt sorry for her at the time—a bright young girl hidden behind her awkwardness—but he had also felt there was little he could do to draw her from her shell.

In the ninth grade Elena began to change. She had grown taller and thinner, and perhaps by then had begun to realize that she knew more than most other people in her class. She was learning and changing, and by grade ten Elena had grown up.

That year Anna Goodman had been her English teacher. Goodman had been a feminist, and although she had left Parkview at the end of that year, her influence on Elena and a few other girls like her had remained.

With Goodman's influence, Elena had come to value her own ideas and her own feelings. Goodman had struggled with the girls' insecurities, with their identities, with the influence of their Greek backgrounds and culture which had molded them to accept the roles that their parents and their environment had prepared

for them. With some girls, her philosophy had fallen on deaf ears. With others it had been noted and forgotten. And with some, like Elena, it had spread the seeds of doubt and curiosity.

Now, although she was still by nature a quiet person, Elena no longer lacked the confidence to question, to speak out, and to hold her own opinion. Chambers would enjoy having her in his class. She could provide the stimulation that turned an ordinary class into a challenging one.

He moved his finger down the list. Again it stopped, and again he smiled. Karen Hudak was also in his class. This could be his lucky year. Karen was also a very bright young woman, and with her and Elena leading the others, this grade eleven might be his best class ever.

The smile stayed on Chambers' face until his finger swept over the very last name on the list. He swore softly under his breath. Teachers were not supposed to be prejudiced, but they were. Just as they had their favorites, they also had students they disliked. And Chambers did not like John Vavaris. He didn't like Vavaris' friends, the cool group that had somehow managed a stranglehold on student politics in Parkview, he didn't like Vavaris' attitude--that don't bug me man, jive--an attitude that had led Vavaris to a habit of minimum effort. Just enough to pass and to hell with the rest. He had taught Vavaris the previous year, and that had been enough. He had quietly hoped that the boy would fail and have to repeat, but Vavaris had somehow squeezed through



the final exam and gone on to grade eleven.

Now Chambers knew that Vavaris was the cross he would bear for having Elena and Karen in one class. He had been dismayed by Karen's relationship with Vavaris the previous spring, feeling that Vavaris had been responsible for Karen's moodiness and falling grades, and feared now that the affair had survived the summer and would continue, perhaps destroying the Karen he thought so much of in the process. Chambers slapped the flat of his hand against his desk top and tossed the classlists into his drawer.

Students began to file into the classroom and choose their seats. Chambers still placed the grade nines in alphabetical order, but the seniors sat where they pleased, changing seats as they wished throughout the year. Except for one or two, he had taught them all before and knew them by name. That was one of the things that made Parkview a nice place to teach.

Chambers nodded and returned the greetings of students as they came in. It was amazing, he thought, what a change occurred in the two years between grade nine and eleven. Students literally grew up in those years. No one, Chambers decided, not even a parent, was as aware of that change as a teacher. Parents lost a clear perspective of the transition simply because their children were such a constant part of their lives, and they were blinded to the subtle development in much the same way a man might miss the day to day aging of his own face, and catch it only in sudden retrospect, when the past, like an old picture, was brought to his

attention.

But a teacher saw the changes because they were aware of the gaps—they saw their students not in the same constant, moment-to-moment way that a mother saw her child, but more in the way a farmer might see a tree he had planted—a series of springs, each one bringing the growth and change of the whole preceding year.

For a teacher the gaps in time occurred when a student was in another class, or during the long summer holidays. Chambers noticed it now as the students filed into his classroom. The boys all seemed taller and heavier than they had the previous spring. One or two sported a new mustache or an unshaven shadow on their cheek. The girls all seemed to have either cut or grown their hair, and they had developed hips and breasts where none had been before. For a moment Chambers felt old and dull in the sameness of his twenty-five years, and he envied his students their opportunity to explore and investigate what they were, and what they were becoming.

Karen Hudak walked into the classroom. She was even more attractive than Chambers had recalled, looked older and more mature. Her shoulder-length, light-brown hair framed her oval face in loose, bouncy waves. Her high, wide cheekbones were dotted with red blush and her mouth sparkled in a bright, toothy smile.

"Karen—looking wonderful as usual," Chambers remarked as

she approached his desk.

"Why, thank you," Karen beamed. She leaned forward and kissed Chambers on the cheek. "I promised myself all summer that when I saw you again I wouldn't be shy and I'd give you a big kiss."

"Well, I approve of that," Chambers smiled. Karen had also been in the school play last year--as the faithful lover of one of the male leads--and Chambers felt close to her. "How was your summer?" he asked.

"Ugg! Don't even mention it," Karen replied. "Have you ever worked for an octopus? My boss was the original dirty old man. He would have made a great preacher 'cause his specialty was the laying on of hands.' I spent more time hiding in the can than selling clothes."

Chambers laughed. "That's the price you pay for being beautiful," he remarked.

"Ahh, how nice. At least you haven't changed over the summer, Steve. Always ready with a compliment."

"Only when they're deserved, Karen. Only when they're deserved." Chambers was pleased that Karen felt relaxed enough to call him by his first name. A few students had started calling him by name during the play rehearsals the previous year, and he found he didn't mind. Mr. Chambers had always been reserved for his father, and he felt more at ease as Stephen.

As he spoke, Chambers saw John Vavaris walk into the room.

Karen, noticing the movement of his eyes, glanced over her shoulder. She turned back quickly and Chambers felt a sudden change in her.

"Something wrong?" Chambers asked as he watched Vavaris saunter slowly to a seat at the back of the classroom.

"Uh-uh," Karen muttered, shaking her head. But she was standing stiff and straight, staring at the empty blackboard beyond his head.

The second bell rang indicating the start of the shortened period. "Well, I'd better get things rolling," Chambers said to her. "We only have twenty-five minutes today." He smiled and tilted his head.

"Oh--right--" Karen muttered, "I'll sit down."

She was about to sit at an empty desk next to Stephen's own when Vavaris called her. Chambers looked up sharply but said nothing. Karen was on her own.

She turned and looked at Vavaris and smiled weakly. Next to him was another empty desk, and he quickly jabbed in its direction with his finger. Karen glanced back at Chambers with what he felt was almost a helpless, apologetic look, then walked down the aisle to the empty seat.

Chambers eyes left her and moved towards the door. Elena Giannopoulos had just come in. She saw Karen seating herself next to Vavaris and waved to her. There were only two free desks left in the classroom and Elena moved to the desk next to Stephen's

and sat down. She smiled a greeting.

"Better late than never," he said gently.

Elena dropped her eyes, almost embarrassed. She had been caught in a line-up in the girls' washroom and run all the way down the hall. She was still breathless.

When Chambers began to call out the attendance, Elena glanced up at him. It felt so good to see him again she could have shouted.

She remembered her very first day in grade eight. Stephen had called out the roll, just as he was doing now. Only in grade eight everyone had been moved around and placed in alphabetical order. Three years had gone by and she was as far from him now as she had been then.

If only she was prettier, Elena thought. If only she looked like Karen--and acted like her. If only she had a little more courage, perhaps Stephen would notice her. She had never considered herself really pretty, but she was more attractive now than she had been in grade eight when she was short and awkward and overweight.

At least last year a few boys had shown a little interest. They hadn't stayed around long--one had told her she was just too smart for a girl--but at least they had noticed she was alive. That was more than Stephen did!

It was unfair, she decided. He saw nothing but a shy little girl, and she had to deal with her gnawing infatuation. She had always liked him; right from the very first day. But it had been

the school play that had cemented her affection. Until then the only time he had ever noticed her was report card day, when he congratulated her on her good marks. But during the course of the play--during rehearsals and the performance--she had felt that he had at last begun to notice her.

She had never been direct or overt, but perhaps her smile or the way she looked at him carried the message, had gotten through, because he began, for a while, to treat her differently. At first she had hoped--it had sprung into her heart like wildfire--that he cared for her. Then sadly she realized that it had probably dawned on Stephen Chambers that she adored him, and that he was responding in the only way he could--not with affection, but with sympathy. It couldn't be anything else. He saw in her, she supposed, a script quite similar to ones he had acted out himself, years before, when he had struggled with infatuations of his own.

She had been discouraged by that discovery, but it did not alter her feelings. She had thrown herself whole-heartedly into the play. Stephen didn't know that she had decided to audition just to be near him, that she had wanted a small part just to be a member of the cast. She had auditioned at first as a nurse for one small scene that took place in a hospital. Then, for some reason, he had asked her to audition for a larger part, and because he had asked her, she had, spending hours each night before a mirror, practicing a walk or an inflection of voice or a twist of

hand. Each day she came fully prepared and eager to please.

Finally Stephen had asked her to try the part of aunt Nettie, the play's leading character. She had memorized three pages of dialogue in one evening, and felt, for some strange reason, very natural, very confident in the role of the old aunt. She imagined how she herself would be in the years ahead when her hair began to grey, and the deep wrinkles began to crease her own skin, and somehow she just knew what aunt Nettie felt, and how aunt Nettie walked, and talked and laughed.

Stephen had been so pleased with her audition that he had spontaneously rushed out onto the makeshift stage and kissed her joyously on the forehead. It was at that very moment Elena decided that come what may, she would love him forever....

The bell rang noisily.

"Okay, tomorrow we get down to work--be here on time," Stephen said to the class while he looked in Elena's direction. She lowered her eyes from his and was still seated at her desk when Karen came up to greet her.

"Elena--how are you? It's good to see you!"

Elena stood, and the two girls kissed one another. "It's nice to be back," she said.

Chambers was still at his desk and Karen spoke to him. He had noticed that she and Vavaris had spent most of the period whispering to one another and he had not stopped them. When the

bell rang, Vavaris had left the room quickly.

"Isn't it strange," Karen said, "how we all curse and scream about school, but on the holidays we sometimes can't wait to get back."

"Tell me that a couple of months from now," Chambers said dryly. "You won't be so enthusiastic then."

"Oh, I don't know about that," Karen argued. "After this year we're sort of on our own; out there in the big, bad world; dog eat dog, sink or swim, and all that. No more Parkview to hide away in. It's a little scary when you think about it--and after this past summer I'm in no rush."

"Well, Karen," Chambers said, "it may be none of my business, but I hope you can buckle down a bit this year. I did notice that your grades had dropped last June."

"Yeah--I noticed too," Karen said remorsefully. "But I'm really going to work this year, Steve. I--" She paused and fell silent as her thoughts turned inward.

Chambers said, "Elena, you make sure this girl works hard this fall. We don't want her growing lazy on us."

"I'll do my best, sir," Elena said.

"Okay, you girls had better get to your next class, the bell is going to ring any second." He checked his watch against the large, old-fashioned clock on the back wall of the classroom.

"Oh damn," Karen exclaimed, suddenly herself again. "I've got gym now. Thank God the class is only twenty-five minutes



today. Miss Lipton won't have time to work us to death."

"I've got to run or I'll be late for physics," Elena said. She smiled when Chambers raised his eyebrow in mock horror of her possible tardiness.

As the two girls hurried out, Chambers slumped back into his seat. When he looked up again, Reena Kellner had come into the classroom and was walking towards his desk. Reena's class was in the same wing, two classrooms down from his own.

"Christ, what a madhouse!" Reena exclaimed. "First day and already it's a madhouse. They gave me every dummy and animal in the school. I just don't believe it! It can't be pure coincidence that my classes get stuck with all the monkeys and idiots. I'm going down to the office and tell them where they can shove these classlists!" Reena waved the sheets of paper under Chambers nose as she sat down on the edge of his desk.

Chambers had known Reena Kellner for a year now--ever since she had started teaching at Parkview the previous September, and still she sometimes startled him. Perhaps because her looks were so deceiving. Her long, blond hair and ice-blue eyes hinted at a cool aloofness, and her tall, slim body, with its small rounded breasts and high waist, moved with a practiced confidence.

But Reena was not icy and aloof. She was, if anything, just the opposite of what she appeared to be. It had not taken him long to discover that.

"Anyway," Reena said, changing the subject, "how was your

summer? I tried to get in touch with you, but you weren't around. I was a little hurt that you didn't bother to call."

Chambers worked his alibi. "I was away most of the summer. Toronto--and the States. Did a little traveling. I didn't get back until last week."

"Last week? Well, you should have been decent and called then, you know."

"Yes, I should have," Chambers apologized. "I'm just lazy and good-for-nothing."

"You weren't such a lazy good-for-nothing last September, Stephen." Reena said coyly, knowing Chambers would understand what she meant. She looked at him with a small, pleased smile, but he said nothing.

"Anyway, you can make it up to me by buying me lunch today," she added. "It's a teachers-only opening day cafeteria special."

"Probably leftovers from last June," Chambers said ironically. "But okay, Reena, you've got yourself one luncheon special."

The bell rang and Reena stood up. "Back to the salt mines," she sighed, arranging her hair with her fingertips. "See you at lunch."

Chambers again sat back in his chair. It was a spare period for him. His schedule gave him two each day. Four periods of teaching--two periods off. Normally the spare would be fifty minutes, a regular period, and he would use it to prepare his classes. Today, like all periods, it was shortened--only twenty-

five minutes--but he had nothing to do and could relax for a while.

He recalled Reena's remark about last September. She was right about one thing--he certainly hadn't been lazy or good-for-nothing then.

His thoughts lured him onto the past. He clasped his fingers behind his head, leaned back and remembered....

Reena Kellner had begun teaching at Parkview the previous September. She was already an experienced teacher, having previously taught in both an elementary school and another high school before joining the History department at Parkview, and she didn't have to undergo that sometimes difficult period of adjustment that new teachers often suffer.

The men on staff had unanimously celebrated her arrival. She was twenty-six, single, good-looking and apparently available. She was also spontaneous and direct, and although some members of the staff were startled by her truckers' vocabulary, the men were initially intrigued and paraded for her favor.

At the same time Reena had arrived, the School Board also assigned Parkview a young, good-looking black, Jeff Thompson, as a remedial reading teacher. To everyone's surprise, Jeff and Reena seemed to hit it off right away, and within a week had become the staffroom's conversational titbit.

Jeff, like Reena, was gregarious and outgoing, and seemed to complement Reena's electric personality. He quickly became friends

with the other half-dozen or so younger male teachers who formed one of Parkview's loose social groups. Once or twice a week, after work, the group would retire to the neighbourhood tavern for a cold beer and a game of pool. It was a time to unwind and bitch and gossip, and Jeff Thompson easily fit in.

One day, during the early days of October, the boys had gathered in the Rachel Street tavern for a few cold pints, and Jeff, quite suddenly, began to discuss his affair with Reena. The boys had discussed it before of course--it was the juiciest kind of grist for beer-stained conversation--and although Jeff had previously hinted that his sexual gymnastics with Reena were not only unbelievable but endless, little if anything had been said about his feelings, or where the relationship might be headed. To the boys, admittedly, feelings were of minor importance. Feelings did, after all, add a humanizing edge to what was enjoyably perceived as hard-core sex and seduction. But Jeff, despite his humor and his air of nonchalance, was bothered.

He leaned across the narrow tavern table and squinted through the smoky air at the men who sat across from him.

"I have a girl--a steady girl," he explained, waving an empty beer glass in his hand for emphasis. "Reena looked like a hot chick--beautiful--ready for a good time--and I was glad to accommodate. Who can say no to an offer like that? But I didn't want it to go too far. My old lady would cut off my sweet black balls if she knew I was messin' around, and Reena just wants more and

more."

They had all laughed then, and kidded Jeff about getting too old to keep two women happy, and about being ready and willing to "help out" if Reena was too much for him to handle. Stephen laughed too, but he hadn't laughed for long.

Early in November, Parkview had held its first evening of parent-teacher interviews. This early interview allowed staff and parents to meet informally and discuss the problems and progress of students in the school.

The parents, mostly immigrant laborers, largely Greek in origin, but with a smattering of Chinese, French, and Jewish, were nearly always so concerned and so respectful towards teaching and education, that they invariably provided an enthusiastic and often heart-warming evening for Parkview teachers.

When the interviews ended at nine o'clock, a number of staff, including Jeff and Reena, dropped into a local brasserie to celebrate the evening's success. It was there Chambers discovered that Reena could drink with the best of them, and several hours later only Jeff, Reena, Stephen and Charlie Humchack, who taught boys gym, remained at the long, red table in the brasserie.

"One more round?" Jeff asked.

"Well the damn place is closing," Reena remarked, her words slurred by the beer she had consumed. "But we can still drink and drink for nothing. I have plenty of booze."

The three men looked at one another and shrugged their shoulders. "Damn good idea," Jeff said loudly, thumping his beer mug on the tabletop.

Reena's apartment was in a downtown highrise on Tupper Street near the Forum. It was a modern, expensive, one-bedroom affair decorated in such a way that to Chambers it seemed to create a visual reflection of Reena's own personality. Outwardly it was tasteful--almost artfully decorated--a magazine photo clipped out and blown to life size. A nice place to visit, but would anyone really live there?

Just inside the apartment door was a small, railed deck from which one descended a half-dozen curved steps to a sunken living room. The room itself held an expensive leather couch and matching recliner. A brown-and-white Scandinavian rug covered a major portion of the imitation parquet floor, and tastefully framed Mucha prints hung from the walls.

In one corner of the large living room area, was a glass-top dining table and white director's chairs, and against one wall stood a high, teak wall-unit holding a color television, expensive stereo components and a well-stocked bar. There were plants everywhere, and the subdued lighting gave the room an air of graceful comfort.

Chambers and Humcheck nodded to one another in silent approval while Jeff watched them and smiled. Chambers had been surprised by Reena's apartment; it was so much more elegant and nouveau than

his own; yet by the time Reena had taken their coats and mixed them a drink, his first impression had curiously modified.

Seated on the brown leather couch he had taken a second look. There were a large number of plants hanging in the long window that covered almost the entire outside wall of Reena's apartment, but many of them were brown and dead, as though they had been left and forgotten and expected to survive on their own. And there was dust on the floor and on the glass-topped dining table, and a dried bone lay on the edge of the carpet, partially hidden by the leg of the recliner. The room, so attractive from a distance, appeared to have been abandoned.

"What the hell is that yelping?" Charlie Humchack asked Reena as she came back into the room. She had disappeared into the bedroom, and now reappeared in a change of clothing—a short silky dress with a dipping neckline. She had taken off her bra and her nipples pressed out against the soft material.

"It's my dog," she replied in an aggravated voice. "I keep him in the bedroom so he won't shit all over the place. I enjoyed him while he was a puppy—he was no bigger than my hand when I got him—but now he's just a pain in the ass."

Jeff said, "Why don't you show the fellows the rest of the apartment. Show them the view from your bedroom balcony."

Reena threw him a quick, annoyed glance, and Chambers noticed he was still smiling the small, strange smile he had noticed earlier.

"Yeah, Reena, hows about a tour?" Humchack insisted.

"It's a bit of a mess," Reena said flatly.

"Big shit!" Humchack bellowed. "We want a tour!" He stood up, wobbling slightly.

They followed her up the two steps that took them out of the living room. To the left, at the start of a narrow hallway that led to the bathroom, was a small saloon door that swung in either direction.

"The kitchen," Reena said impatiently. It was modern—chrome and formica. There was a pile of dishes in the sink, more littering the counter. "Hate dishes!" Reena muttered.

At the end of the hallway were two doors almost directly opposite one another. To the left was the bathroom. To the right, the bedroom. Inside the bedroom, the yelping had become a high-pitched whine.

"Buster, you shut up!" Reena shouted as she opened the bedroom door. "Go lie down—bad dog!"

The dog jumped up, quivering, its tongue flapping, but Reena raised her hand threateningly and it scurried to the far side of the bed, its long nails clicking on the wooden floor. It was a large dog, a mutt with a lot of Labrador, its white coat splashed with rust-brown patches.

"You get a good view of the river from the porch," Reena said. She pointed to a sliding glass door that opened on a small concrete balcony.



There was a double bed in the room, and an ivory colored bureau. One wall was lined with bookshelves covered mostly with paperbacks. There was a small portable television on the bureau, and some dirty dishes on a standing tray beside it.

The bed was unmade, and clothes and newspapers were scattered across the floor. The air had a musty smell, like dog, and old food and feces.

Reena walked across the bedroom and opened the door to the balcony. "A mess," she said. She picked up the tray of dishes. "More goddamn dishes," she complained. "Which reminds me that I'm starving. I'm going to call for a pizza."

Chambers knew now why the living room seemed so sterile-- why there was dust on the furniture. This was where Reena lived-- in the bedroom--eating take-out food. The other room was just for company.

Reena went to the telephone beside the bed, while Chambers and Humchack made their way back to the living room. They sat down with Jeff Thompson.

"Quite a place, isn't it?" Jeff remarked. "Did you see the bedroom? It's always like that. And the poor mutt...I don't think it ever gets out of the bedroom except when she takes it downstairs to shit--and I don't think she does that more than once a week."

"Why the hell does she have a dog in a place like this?" Chambers exclaimed.

"Well," Jeff responded. "She says he's good protection-- a good watch dog--but I have my own theory.

"Which is?" Chambers asked.

"Which is--instead of calling the mutt Buster, she should have called him Whiskey!"

"Why 'Whiskey'?" Humchack asked with a puzzled look.

"'Cause you can bet he's a great licker!" Jeff exclaimed with a wide grin.

The three men burst into laughter at the play on words, and were still laughing when Reena joined them.

"What's so funny?" she inquired, pouring herself another scotch from the bottle stored on her wall-unit.

"Oh nothing," Jeff said, still chuckling. "We were just talking about how funny dogs can be sometimes."

"Well my dog is definitely not funny," Reena declared.

"Anybody here wanna free doggie?"

"Not me," Jeff answered coyly. "I'm strictly a pussy-man myself."

Reena laughed with them this time, and Jeff took the other men's glasses for a re-fill.

Reena finished her drink and looked at each of the three men slowly in succession. "I was just wondering--"

"It's definitely me, honey-pie," Jeff interrupted. "That's why I can't wear shorts--it's just too embarrassing."

"I wasn't talking about that," Reena said in feigned aggravation.

"I was just wondering how differently each of you kiss a woman."

"I don't know how they kiss," Jeff claimed. "But I kiss the best."

"I've 'had better," Reena countered sarcastically.

"But I'm only good when I'm sober," Jeff insisted, ignoring Reena's remark. "When I'm drunk, I'm dy-no-mite!"

"Prove it, you bastard!" Reena demanded, moving over to Jeff by the bar. She put her arms around his neck and kissed him.

"Medium firecracker," she said solemnly when the long kiss was over.

"That definitely calls for another drink," Jeff laughed.

Reena sat on the couch beside Stephen. "Mind if I give you a try?" she asked him.

"Be my guest," Stephen said.

They kissed, and for a moment Reena sat with her eyes closed as though savoring the flavor of a new dish. "HMMMMM!" She got up and walked over to Charlie Humchack on the recliner.

"Well, what's the verdict?" Jeff asked when she had finished with Charlie. "Am I not the greatest? Do I not continue to perpetuate that accurate myth of the black man's natural prowess?"

"Very similar," Reena said with a shake of her head. "Very similar stuff. Charlie, you could be a bit more gentle, but aside from that it would be pretty fuckin' hard to tell."

Jeff was standing behind her and could see the smiling faces of his two friends. He clutched his groin with his free hand and

said, "I know something else that's fuckin' hard."

The two men laughed and Reena swung around to face Jeff. "You're always talking about that prick of yours," she said. "Well I've seen it brother, and you can certainly wear shorts. You could get away with just a jock strap!"

Jeff grimaced as Stephen and Charlie applauded. Reena walked over to him and placed her hand on the zipper of his pants. Her tone of voice had changed.

"But it's not too bad for a little fellow like you," she said, as she slowly pulled down his fly, reached into his pants and pulled out his now-erect organ.

Jeff stood there, drink in hand, watching her and grinning. His penis stood out like a miniature flagpole.

"This is a much better contest," Reena said deliberately.

She walked over to Charlie Humchack and pulled him out of his seat. She unbuckled his belt and pulled his pants down around his ankles. "There we go," she said, dropping his nylon undershorts after his pants. Humchack looked at Jeff sheepishly and grinned. He had a flagpole of his own.

Stephen had already stood up. He couldn't believe this was really taking place, but he was drunk and he didn't care. This had never happened before, and it might never happen again. Life was there to be experienced. If Reena didn't mind three men running naked and erect around her apartment, why should he? He felt his pants dropping to the floor, and soft, warm fingers

closing on his penis.

"Still too hard to tell--if you'll forgive the pun," Reena laughed. "We'll have to do some more testing."

She took Jeff by the hand and brought him closer. He had stepped out of his pants and now wore only his shirt and a pair of socks. The three men formed a semi-circle in the middle of Reena's rug.

Without a word she dropped to her knees and began to caress each of them in turn. A sound, almost a throaty growl, came from her lips as she moved from one to the other in quick succession. Above her, still grinning, but now with more self-consciousness, the three men eyed themselves and Reena in turn, and quietly touched their nearly emptied glasses in a silent, mutual toast.

Reena was to prove that night that she could easily accommodate all three of them. After she had performed so well on her knees, she then her one at a time: Stephen first--winning the toss for her, then Jeff, then Charlie. Now Reena was directing a game between Jeff and Stephen faced one another over her. Playfully they winked and shook hands. After, still naked, the four were lounging on Reena's couch when the doorbell rang. Without a moment's hesitation, Reena ran down the half-dozen curving stairs to the door. "Must be the pizza."

When the pizza man saw Reena without a stitch of clothing his mouth fell open.

"Come in," Reena said, stepping aside.

The startled man entered, gallantly averting his eyes from Reena's naked body. Jeff Thompson snickered as the man looked down into the living room and saw the three nude males lying on the floor. They waved and the man's eyes popped wide.

"Thank you," Reena said, handing the man the money for the pizza, "and keep the change."

The pizza man left the apartment walking backwards and tripped on the carpeting in the corridor. "Careful, now," Reena said warmly as she closed the door.

The four of them broke into raucous laughter.

But no one was laughing the following morning.

When Chambers arrived in school the staffroom was already buzzing with news of the whole affair. Reena had arrived early and blithely told everyone in sight the details of the whole evening.

Chambers spent the day hiding in his classroom, and that was only a small part of the trouble in store for him. Being embarrassed was a fleeting, temporary thing. Much worse was the fact that Reena, using the evening as a springboard, began to lessen her demands on Jeff Thompson, and pay a good deal more attention to him.

It was a few days after the celebrated menage that Chambers' made his greatest mistake. Reena had invited him, alone, to dinner. His instinct warned him to refuse, to lie if necessary,

but he decided he couldn't, that he didn't want to insult her even though her shocking disclosures had opened a veritable can of worms. He thought the dinner might be a chance to clue her in, to straighten out that head of hers; get her mind working more like her body. He noticed Jeff beaming like the Cheshire cat and could have kicked his head in. The clever bastard had probably counted on this happening in the first place.

Chambers had gone to dinner and ended up staying the night. He blamed himself for that. The flesh was weak. The next morning Reena has told him that she loved him. It was the beginning of a long, hard road....

Chambers came out of his moody recollection and back to his empty classroom. He sighed, fully realizing that he was still paying for that little adventure of a year ago. It had taken Reena six long months to accept the fact that he was not going to be her number-one man, and even now--like this lunch date--he was not entirely free of her demands for attention. Once Reena had set her hooks in you, you just didn't escape. Their relationship had evolved into a minor emotional battlefield, filled with tiny wars and short-lived truces. Reena's behavior towards him was as varied and inconsistent as her moods, and he never knew what next to expect. But whatever it was--good or bad--he would just as soon have avoided it.

"--So tomorrow I'll give out the textbooks and we'll get

down to work," Christina Arianakis told her class as she checked the clock on the classroom wall. Still a few minutes before the bell to end the period. "Just stay in your seats and talk quietly until the bell rings," she said as she moved to her desk and sat down.

This was her grade eleven French class. It was the first time she had taught this senior course, and she was a bit apprehensive. She would have a lot of preparation and lesson planning. The final year exams in oral and written French were generally difficult, and because a student had to pass French in order to graduate, it placed a certain amount of pressure on everyone.

Christina looked up and saw Bobby Bower staring at her from his seat at the back of the class. She tried to smile under his intense gaze, but felt a rush of warmth on her cheeks and quickly averted her eyes. Bobby was like that sometime--he could make you feel very uncomfortable; like an insect under a microscope.

Christina knew that Bobby liked her. That very morning he had given her the pretty bouquet of Jonquils that sat on her desk. He had come in just as the homeroom period began and bashfully placed them by her elbow. A few of her grade eight students had begun to snicker, but Bobby had turned on them with such a baleful glare they had stopped immediately.

Now Bobby was staring at her. What did he see? she wondered. She was not used to being stared at. Only Nick Galanos liked to stare at her, and that was because he wanted to marry her. She



had thought of poor Nick a lot recently. Now that he was gone she missed his concern and his attention, and she waited for his letters from Vancouver. She had met Nick last spring. Her uncle had brought him to dinner in the Greek custom, and somehow, over the summer months, he had fallen in love with her. When he had suddenly been sent for a year of training with his company's West Coast branch he had unhesitatingly asked her to go along--to give up teaching and become his wife. And she had delayed, but not refused him. She knew that Nick pleased her father. That it meant a good deal to the old man to see her safely married. But she needed time to think--to decide what she wanted from her life. Marriage to Nick would settle her once and for all. He would want children--they had discussed it once--and she would become a mother and housewife.

And yet, perhaps giving up her own career would be a small price to pay for a lifetime of security. And an even smaller price if it somehow made up to her parents for the pain she had once brought them....

The lunch bell jangled harshly, and students scrambled into the hall even more quickly than usual. Only Bobby Bower remained in his seat. Christina saw him sitting there.

"Bobby? It's lunchtime," she said.

"Do you like your flowers, Miss Arianakis?" the boy asked shyly.

"They're lovely, Bobby. Thank you very much for bringing

them."

"They were pretty--they reminded me of you--so I bought them," Bobby said eagerly.

"Yes--well--thank you again."

There was a silence. Christina felt that Bobby wanted to talk, that he had something to say, and that he was trying to find the courage to begin.

"Miss Arianakis--"

"Yes, Bobby?"

Stephen Chambers walked into the classroom, interrupting. He clapped his hands. "Hey, it's lunchtime--not time for a summit conference. Bobby, can't you see Miss Arianakis is starving to death?" He pinched Christina's cheek. "See, all skin and bone."

Bobby glared at Stephen for a moment then stood up suddenly and stomped out of the room.

"Oh-oh, I think I said the wrong thing," Chambers admitted. Christina nodded. "I think Bobby had something to tell me. He had just about worked up the courage when in you came."

"Oh well, he'll get over it," Chambers shrugged. "He always does. You know Bobby, always flying off the handle. You should have seen him in grade eight. I'm sometimes surprised he's made it this far."

"But we can't ignore him," Christina argued,

"No, we can't ignore him. But if we arrange our schedules

just to accommodate Bobby's whims, the whole school would grind to a halt. Don't worry, he'll be back with his little tale of woe soon enough. Bobby gets mad, but he forgets it in ten minutes."

"He has a rough time at home, you know," Christina said, lingering on Bobby. "He doesn't get along with his step-father."

Chambers sighed. "Well look, who gets along with fathers nowadays? Ask half the kids in school and they'll tell you they'd gladly shoot the old boy. It's a sign of the times."

Christina shrugged.

"Anyway, all this is shop-talk," Chambers said. "And we have the whole year for that. Right now is the time for gourmet feasting in the school cafeteria. Lunch, as they say, waits for no man--or woman. And as terrible as it's sure to be, starvation allows me to eat anything."

They walked through the noisy halls to the staff cafeteria and sat at one of the several tables with Pat Ender and a few others.

They had just begun to eat when the cafeteria door flew open with a startling crash. It was Reena Kellner. She marched directly to Chambers' table.

"Thank you for the lunch date--or did you forget about it since you asked me?" she said loudly.

Chambers wiped his mouth with a paper napkin. "I'm sorry, Reena," he said apologetically. "I thought we were going to

meet here."

"Meet here!" Reena exclaimed. "What do you mean, meet here! I'm sitting in my classroom waiting for you, and you expect to meet here. Why the hell don't you explain what you mean instead of playing games!"

Chambers thought he smelled alcohol on Reena's breath. He wondered for a moment if her sudden hostility had come from a bottle. There had been rumors about Reena's drinking last spring.

"Look, I'm sorry," he apologized. "Sit down and have some lunch. It's meatloaf today. You'll love hating it."

"You can shove your meatloaf," Reena hissed. She swung on her heels and marched out of the cafeteria.

"Ouch," Chambers said with a wince. "I don't seem to be winning friends today, do I?"

"Just Parkview welcoming you back," Pat Ender chuckled. "But you'd better be careful, Stephen. Reena looked like she was ready to tear you to pieces."

"Don't worry, I'm used to Reena," Chambers declared. "I'll just get my whip and chair out of hock over the weekend."

He glanced at Christina, wondering what she thought. She knew about his brief fling with Reena, that was common knowledge, but he also hoped she knew he was no longer interested, and hadn't been for a long time.

It was hard to tell what she was thinking. She was staring at her plate, eyes downcast, saying nothing. Maybe she didn't

believe that Reena was as easy to manage as he had claimed. He wondered if he believed it himself.

The bell rang and the school emptied in minutes, the shouts and footsteps and banging lockers fading away to a peaceful silence as students rushed out into the warm September sunshine.

Teachers sighed in relief. The first day was over. The wheels had begun to turn and the new year was underway. Many wondered what kind of year it would be, but none could know. Some years were more difficult than others. All contained surprises. What occurred today gave birth to the events of tomorrow, and what occurred today was as much a matter of chance as it was of resolution.

Pat Ender moved around the art room replacing the equipment she had brought out to demonstrate to her classes. That was the first thing she did each year; display the materials, explain what they were, and demonstrate how to use them. Then she would show the class where everything was stored, and how to replace things after each lesson so someone else could find what they needed. But that was lesson two--tomorrow's assignment--there hadn't been enough time for that today.

Pat washed her hands in the stained aluminum sink, and caught sight of her reflection in the small cracked mirror above it.

Hello face, she thought reflectively. You've been staring

back at me for a long time now, haven't you?

She took off her round, metal-framed glasses and washed them under the flow of warm water from the tap. You were never, very pretty, dear face, but I must admit you're not aging too badly at all. If I didn't know you I'd say you weren't a day over--well, that you weren't on the far side of thirty-one, anyway!

Pat brushed her wiry afro with her fingertips. The hair suits you, she said to herself, pleased with the results of a late-summer perm. It's spunky--that's what it is. It's spunky and so you're spunky. And you don't even have to take care of it. Much, much better than having long hair.

My God, she thought suddenly, what are you doing? Worrying about how you look all of a sudden? Back to adolescence when it was check the skin for acne before you went out of the house? Pat laughed softly to herself. It was crazy. She hadn't done that kind of thing for years.

There was a knock at the door of the classroom. "Just a minute," Pat called out. She finished drying her glasses, replaced them--her green eyes flickering one final glance at herself in the mirror--and went to the door.

"Hi Pat. Are you busy?" It was Karen Hudak.

"No--not at all. Just straightening up a bit. I was hoping you might drop by today, Karen. Come on in."

"You sure it's no bother? I could come back--"

"Of course not," Pat insisted. "I've just about finished. There are one-hundred and eighty class days in a school year, so that means I have only one-hundred and seventy-nine days of cleaning up left to do."

Karen laughed. "Students don't change much do they?"

"Not when it comes to cleaning up, they don't."

Pat put the last of the equipment back on the shelves as Karen looked wistfully around the classroom. "It'll be good to get back to work," she said at last. "I didn't do any drawing at all over the summer. I tried once or twice, but--but it just wasn't happening."

"I know what you mean," Pat said, sitting down at the long table next to Karen. "It's happened to me before, too. I've been busy with other things, or something was on my mind, and no matter how hard I tried, I just couldn't get started. And anything I did get done was always terrible, and I ended up throwing it away."

"Yeah--when things are bothering you, I guess they--I guess that can happen."

Pat sensed Karen's hesitation and knew the girl had come to talk. She decided not to push it. She would let it happen on its own--letting the conversation carry itself along until Karen felt comfortable. There was no rush.

"I guess I'm living proof of what can happen when someone gets preoccupied," Pat said casually. "When I graduated from

McGill with my fine arts degree; I was on top of the world. I was going to take life by storm, tip it upside down, become the greatest sensation since Michelangelo Buonarroti. I found a studio--a little one I shared with a friend--and started painting like crazy. Utrillo, Bellows, Hassam--I loved them all, and I wanted to paint like them; and I wanted to experiment with myself. I'd stay up all night working, and I'd sleep into the afternoon. Evenings I would spend drinking coffee or wine in little cafes, and it was better than being in Paris. I felt certain that it wouldn't be long before my work would establish itself. I would find my style, be discovered, and my paintings would hang in every gallery in the city--in the country for that matter."

She smiled at Karen. For some reason she didn't mind talking about herself. It didn't matter that Karen was a student. As a young girl she had often wondered about the priests in the dark confessionals; wondered what they did with the endless secret sins they gathered but never returned. Perhaps if she was open about her own life, Karen would find it easier to talk.

"Then I fell in love," Pat continued. "Madly in love. Maybe I had never really been in love before and I just wasn't ready for it. I couldn't think about anything else. I couldn't concentrate, and I couldn't paint--not anything decent, anyway.

"And when that happens it takes about six months of craziness before things start to settle down again, and I was just beginning to get back to work, feeling guilty as hell about



losing all that time but feeling calm and happy instead of crazy--and what happens? The relationship starts to break up. It was just little things at first, but they kept building up, and pretty soon instead of working I was fussing and worrying and losing sleep over what was happening to my wonderful love affair.

"And--well--it ended. Just like that it was over, and I was back where I started--except that instead of being full of hope and optimism, I was miserable and depressed. I cried a lot and felt that I had missed my one and only chance--that I would never be loved again--and again I couldn't do any work. It was horrible, and by this time all the money I had was gone and I was broke."

Pat paused, and Karen, curious now, asked: "What did you do?"

The art teacher smiled and sighed. "So--what I did was write my mother in Toronto--I'm from Toronto originally--and tell her I wanted to go back to school in September to become an art teacher. So, to make a long story short, I was financed for another year, I got my teaching diploma, and--here I am!"

"Don't you ever want to be an artist, Pat--I mean, full time--without having to teach?"

"Oh--I've thought about it. It's a nice thought. But my little love affair taught me a valuable lesson. It taught me that if I wanted to be a painter, a good one I mean, I'd have

to put one hundred percent of myself into the job. I would have to eat and sleep painting. My affair taught me that I didn't have that kind of dedication--that kind of strength. I wanted other things out of life besides painting, and those things have cut into whatever bit of talent I had to start with."

"But you're really good, Pat--I've seen your work. It's--it's terrific."

"It's okay." Pat smiled. "But Karen, there are thousands of people who are good. Only one or two of them are good enough. Only one in a million is great. And the rest of us have to eat and pay the rent."

"I'd love to paint--but I'd never be good enough," Karen said wistfully.

"Hey--wait a minute," Pat insisted. "I didn't want my little story to scare you off. You should try to paint--you have marvelous talent. You're much, much better than I was at your age. You're the best student I've ever had, and I'm going to keep after you until you're famous and your work sells for millions."

Karen smiled warmly. "Thank you Pat. It's hard to believe that you can really like my stuff, but maybe you see something in my dirty splotches and amateurish sketches

that I can't. It's nice to hear, anyway."

There was a brief, warm silence. Both women felt the affection that existed between them. The ice had been broken.

Pat spoke first. "It won't be easy, Karen. I'm not saying that."

"Yes--I was just thinking--what you said before--about dedication and one hundred percent. I don't have that, Pat. I don't have the will power."

"How do you know until you've tried?" Pat said encouragingly.

"Pat--I'm only seventeen, and I only have to deal with stupid school work, but I already know I can't do it. Things already bother me too much and stop me from working. Look at my grades last year."

"By 'things' you mean--you and John Vavaris?"

For a moment Karen was silent. She nodded her head slowly. "Yes--I mean--oh goddamn--" Karen struggled with her confusion. She wanted so badly to talk, but it was so hard to begin.

"I know it's hard, Karen," Pat said softly.

"I--want to tell you, Pat--I just--don't know how."

"Start at the beginning. That might be the easiest way."

Karen nodded. "It's simple, really. Everyone in the school knows what happened last year. I started seeing Johnny a lot, and before I knew it nothing else mattered. I skipped classes--I didn't do my homework. Like you said, I was 'head over heels'.

"Well, in the beginning of the summer Johnny and I didn't

see one another--we were both working--but in August, Johnny lost his job--some waiter had started a fight--and I started seeing him again. One day--one day we--we got drunk--and we were in this apartment and--" Karen stopped, and her eyes dropped to the floor. Pat waited a few seconds for her to continue, and then sensing her difficulty said: "And--you made love?"

Karen nodded slowly. When she looked up again there were tears in her eyes.

Pat said, "It's no crime to make love, Karen. People were made to love--and to make love. That's what it's all about."

Karen began to cry, and Pat moved her chair and put her arm around the girl. For a while she let Karen cry quietly, giving her time to free the feelings bottled up inside her. Pat's own eyes grew moist as she held the girl gently in her arms.

When Karen finally sniffled and wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her shirt, Pat went to the sink and brought her a paper towel.

"Thank you," Karen whispered as she blew her nose. She sighed and tried a weak, self-conscious smile. "I feel a lot better now."

"It's good to get something like that off your chest," Pat said sympathetically. "I'm glad you did, Karen."

"I wanted to talk to someone who would--understand. Someone who wouldn't tell me how wrong it was--or how young I was. I

knew you would understand, Pat."

"There was nothing wrong with what you did Karen--despite what other people might say. You have your own feelings and your own emotions, and no one can tell you how you should think and feel. You have to decide for yourself. You have to do what you think is best for you--not for John Vavaris, not for your family, not for anyone else. It's your life, and you have to deal with it. Other people have their own lives to deal with, and the same rules apply to them.

"Now sometimes what's best for one person is not best for another, and that's where the conflict begins. And sometimes we make mistakes--all of us--nobody is perfect, and we end up getting hurt. We get over it, and hopefully we learn from it. The biggest problem is--and I guess you're aware of it--sometimes our feelings really distract us--we go 'head-over-heels'--and we forget about everything else--like your schoolwork last spring. And maybe we learn from that too. But whatever we do, we're always left with one big question. One big question in search of an answer: Where do we go from here?"

"I know," Karen murmured. "That's what's so confusing. I don't want this year to be like last year. School is important to me--and to my mother. I don't want to waste it. But I--I don't want to give up Johnny. And I just get so confused. I don't know if he--oh, Pat--I'm so confused--I don't know what to do."

Again Pat put her arms around the girl. "Listen," she said calmly. "We can't understand everything at once, and we can't always come up with one answer or one simple feeling that solves it all. It takes time. Slow, painful time. And you have to be strong and wait it out. Your job is to take care of yourself. To avoid being caught up in old regrets while things are working themselves out. It's a new year, and new things will happen. Give yourself time to--"

The buzzer on the intercom sounded, startling them both. "Damn them!" Pat complained.

She spoke into the intercom. "What? No--haven't seen them. I'll keep my eyes open. Yeah, okay."

Pat walked back to Karen beside the table. "It was the office. They've lost a set of master keys that open every door in the school. They're afraid they might have been stolen and they're in a panic. A typical Parkview fiasco."

Karen smiled wanly. She had composed herself, and her tears had dried. "I've got to go," she said, checking her wristwatch. "Thank you for listening, Pat. I hate to bother you with my silly little--"

Pat cut her off. "Please, Karen. I should be thanking you. The fact that you can tell me things that are bothering you makes this--being here--teaching--all worthwhile. I feel like a friend now, instead of just a cog in the great wheel of Education."

"You are my friend, Pat," Karen said. "You really are."

She smiled softly. "Gotta go." She turned quickly and left the classroom, waving goodbye from the door.

Pat stared at the door after it had closed. She felt tears sting her eyes for the second time. What right did she have to give advice? she wondered. Her own life was certainly no model of perfection and serenity. How easy it was to tell people to take their time when they were the ones doing the suffering. It wasn't so simple when the pain was first-hand.

The door of her past emotions, barred tightly for so long, momentarily cracked open, and Pat was touched by the pain that had engulfed her a year before. Here were feelings that had diminished with time, but were not forgotten. To Pat, the pattern of what she had experienced was now achingly clear: Infatuation, contentment, disillusion, dissolution. The end of the affair.

The story she had told Karen of her college romance had been true, but she had not told her it had all happened again a second time. And the second time had been no easier than the first. She had always hated the concept of marriage--hated the patterns it created--patterns that led so many women to surrender their own potential for the relationship--or, more often, for the man in the relationship. Marriage was never a partnership of equals.

But then, what was left? Being alone didn't mean you could avoid the problem; not unless you were somehow able and willing to avoid your own life. One still loved, and wanted to be loved in return, and married or not the need didn't disappear, and the

pain was the same, if it came--when it came. And it always ~~did~~....

Where was Karen now? Pat thought. Trapped--stuck somewhere in the limbo between her childhood and her maturity? Wanting her own life and yet afraid of it. Up against the wall of decision while the questions, like bullets, banged away on the inside of her skull.

Do we all go through it? she wondered. Is it a universal phenomenon--the rites of initiation into our screwy society? Or is it all reserved for a few unlucky ones, the sacrificial lambs, like Karen--like me?

Pat shrugged. The day was over and tomorrow was on the way. Quietly she left the empty artroom, locking the door behind her.



Chapter three:

Charlie Humchack blew his whistle and the Parkview senior soccer team moved off for a mile run around the practice field in Fletcher's Field Park. Humchack nudged Paul Shatram, the short, stocky physics teacher who had volunteered to help with the team.

"They're getting better—but they still aren't good," Humchack said flatly. His eyes followed the straggling line of gold-and-blue shirted runners that moved slowly down the far side of the field. "We may never get these guys in shape."

Two days earlier, on Wednesday, the Parkview team had played their first game against Dundas High and lost five to three. Parkview had the basic skill—the Greek background of the players provided them with the fundamentals—but they didn't have the conditioning. Almost all of them worked during the summer, neglected to keep in shape, and reported for soccer in September soft and overweight.

"We'll just have to keep workin' 'em," Shatram said decisively.

Humchack suppressed a smile. He enjoyed hearing Shatram talk like that. Shatram was thirty-four, balding, and forty pounds beyond thinness. His wife had apparently complained he was going to die of a heart attack and leave her widowed with three children, so Shatram had bought himself a sweatsuit and volunteered to help coach the team. He didn't run much, but he yelled up a storm.

"It sure isn't like it used to be," Humchack complained.

"When I was in school there were three guys for every position, and you had to work your butt off just to get in the game. Now—phuuu—anybody can make the team. Sometimes we have to beg guys to come out and play for us. In those days we had athletes—real athletes—not guys who bitch about a few laps and a few sit-ups. I don't know what's happened to kids today—they don't think the same way we did."

"It's probably just the Greeks," Shatra said. "They're lazy in the classroom, and they're lazy on the field. Sparta has been dead for a long time."

"No, it's not just the Greeks," Humchack argued. "I've talked to other coaches at other schools, and they have the same problem. The kids today just want things too easy; and they get 'em too easy. They don't have to work for things, and they scream bloody murder if the goodies don't drop right in their laps."

The two men watched the first group of players approach them after lapping the field. John Vavaris was well in lead of the others.

"We have one real good jock," Humchack murmured approvingly. "Vavaris there. Always in shape. Always ready. The best we have in basketball, soccer, gymnastics—you name it. He's a wise-ass and likes to shoot off his mouth, but you have to hand it to him—well, you saw him score those three goals on Wednesday."

Shatra agreed. "If we had ten like him we'd have nothing to worry about."

Vavaris ran by, moving easily, and saluted the two coaches. The others followed, jogging more slowly, a few already stopped and walking.

"C'mon ladies, move your butts," Shatra hollered in his cultivated basso, his short pudgy arms waving frantically.

Vavaris stepped out of the shower and dried himself off with the scratchy white school towel. He walked to his locker and began to dress. He splashed his face with a brittle-smelling after-shave and sprayed deodorant under his arms and on his pubic hair from an aerosol can.

"Why do you do that, Johnny?" Tom Dimitopoulos asked, puzzled by the pubic hair spraying.

"So I don't smell like you, turkey--that's why," Vavaris answered tersely. "How come you don't take a shower after you practice, man? You must smell like a horse's ass."

"I take a shower at home," Tommy said defensively. "I don't like the shower here."

Vavaris shook his head. Half the soccer team never showered in the school. The coach had stopped trying to make them ages ago. They would put their clothes on right over their sweat and go home. It was Greek-style modesty--there was nothing wrong with the school shower. Some guys took showers with their underwear on. They were nuts.

"You comin' over to the poolroom tonight, Johnny?" Dimitopoulos

asked.

"Yeah--I'll be there. But I may be late. I'm seeing Karen Hudak tonight. She's telling her old lady she's going to the library, and then coming to meet me."

"Where ya' gonna go?"

"I'm taking her--look man, I'm not supposed to say anything about this, but--ah--we got a little place, you know," Vavaris flicked his eyebrows meaningfully. "A little booze, a little this, a little that!"

Tommy Dimitopoulos shook his head. He was in grade ten, and Vavaris was his secret hero. "You malaka!" he said admiringly.

"Is she hot for you?"

"Hey man!" Vavaris snapped his fingers. "You know who you're talkin' to? I make 'em hot, baby. They love it! Sooner or later they all love it!"

Karen Hudak piled the supper dishes into the sink and filled the rubber dishpan with warm, soapy water.

"You want a hand with the dishes Karen?" her mother called from the living room.

"No mother, you sit down and relax--watch t.v.--I can do it myself."

Karen didn't want her mother in the kitchen. She was too nervous. She had a date with Johnny but her mother thought she was going to the library to research an English paper. She was

afraid her mother would notice how jittery she was.

She and Johnny had been seeing one another in school, but this was their first after-hours date since the summer. It wasn't a date really, Karen thought. It was more like a summit conference. They were meeting at the apartment to discuss their relationship. She was still uncertain about how she felt--about how Johnny felt. They needed to talk. The meeting was her idea--she had suggested it to Vavaris the day before.

That first day of school, when Johnny had called her back to sit with him in Stephen Chambers' class, she had tried to explain to him how she felt--how what had happened between them was more serious to her than to him--but he had just become upset and refused to discuss it. He had said she was just being stupid, that everybody did it and it was no big deal, and why should they stop now that they had started.

For a few days after that they had been distant, and she had been almost afraid to speak to him. Her talk with Pat Ender had helped, and she tried to be patient as Pat suggested, but she wanted to be close to Johnny again, to rid herself of the wired tension that coiled in her stomach, and to explain things more clearly so Johnny would begin to understand what kind of person she really was.

Finally, unable to cope with the coolness that frayed their communication, she had apologized to Vavaris for her behavior, and for a while things were right again.

She got her period--flooding her with relief, and consoled herself with the kissing and the holding that went with Vavaris' acceptance of her apology.

But Karen knew it was only a delaying action, that she couldn't remain silent forever, and when Vavaris suggested they spend the evening at the apartment, as she knew he would, she agreed on condition that they go there to talk. Reluctantly, and after some persuasion, Vavaris had agreed.

Finishing the dishes and wiping her hands on a dry dishtowel, Karen went into the living room. It was a small apartment--two bedrooms, kitchen, living room--furnished with old second-hand furniture that has been largely contributed by relatives over the years. The walls were a faded beige that had been familiar to Karen for half-a-dozen years. Mrs. Hudak sat in the darkened room on the old black couch. The television was on, but her eyes were closed.

"Mother, I'm going to the library now. Will you be alright?" Karen asked as she picked up her briefcase from the small bedroom directly off the living room.

Her mother's eyes opened. "Oh, I'll be fine, dear. Auntie will call later and we'll chat for a while. Just make sure you're not too late, you know how I worry."

"I'll be home early, momma. You don't have to worry." She kissed her mother goodbye.

Karen walked north and west, past Parkview, through Fletcher's

Field, and up Park Avenue to the apartment where Vavaris was waiting. She walked quickly, afraid that someone might see her as she made her way into the building. She knocked, and Vavaris opened the door.

"Welcome baby," he said warmly as Karen's heart sank. She could see he had been drinking. There was a half-emptied bottle of wine on the table.

"We have the place all to ourselves tonight," Vavaris murmured. "I told the guys we hadn't been alone for a long time. Pretty good, huh?"

"Great," Karen said, her voice without enthusiasm.

Vavaris seemed not to notice. "Have a drink," he offered, pouring her some wine.

"I don't think I should, Johnny. Last time--"

"Last time--ass time!" Vavaris cut her off. "It's only wine. It won't affect you like the hard stuff. Come on, try it." He handed her a glass.

Karen sipped at the wine and made a face. "Ohhh--it's bitter!" she complained.

"Bitter? How can you say it's bitter?" Vavaris argued. "It's good Quebec wine. Blessed by the Church, tabernac! You get a taste for it after a few hundred glasses."

"I'll never get a taste for it," Karen stated emphatically.

"Okay--okay. I'm an agreeable guy. You don't have to drink it. I have a perfect solution anyway." He took a package of

cigarettes from his shirt pocket.

"I didn't know you smoked," Karen said in surprise.

"I don't smoke--cigarettes," Vavaris said melodramatically. But I do smoke these." He had taken a thin, twisted cigarette out of the package.

"Is that marijuana?" Karen asked.

"A joint, my dear," Vavaris said, handing Karen the cigarette. "Good stuff--Mexican."

Karen looked at him. "Oh, I couldn't--"

"Did you ever try it?" Vavaris interrupted.

"No, but--"

"Then try it! It's not like booze. It's different--better. You'll really feel great."

"But we have to talk," she said. "You promised, Johnny."

Vavaris waved his hand in the air. "We will talk--we will. But this stuff will help us. It'll make talking easier. I think you want to get into the heavies, and I don't think I could handle it unless I was stoned."

Karen looked at the marijuana. She had always been curious about it. The talk about all the dope in the high schools was mostly talk. This was the first time she had ever seen it.

"What happens the first time?" she asked.

Vavaris shrugged. "Usually nothing. Most people don't even get high. Sometimes you feel a little something, but usually not. But this is real good stuff, so I don't know."



"What happens when you get high?"

"The fucking world looks beautiful," Vavaris explained.

"You hear better, see better, taste things better. You get super-energized or really mellowed out. Whatever your head is into. And you have no more worries. Everything is a blast." He took the joint from Karen's hand and lit it.

Karen watched while he took a deep breath. He handed her the smoking cigarette and pantomimed the action of inhaling. Karen put the joint delicately to her lips and drew in her breath. Immediately she began to cough. She had smoked cigarettes, but only on occasions.

Vavaris exhaled. "Loosen your lips a bit," he told her. "If you don't take in some air with the smoke it can get too hot for your lungs."

Karen tried again, this time successfully. "That a girl," Vavaris said encouragingly.

They finished the joint and Karen discovered that she was stoned, or at least she was feeling what she heard being stoned was like. Vavaris began to kiss her neck and her skin felt like velvet and mink.

"Not now, Johnny," she pleaded weakly. "We have to talk."

"Talk later," Vavaris murmured in her ear. "We have better things to do."

Karen closed her eyes. Johnny was right. They could talk later. When the world stopped fading in and out and her skin

stopped feeling like velvet.

They made love, and it wasn't at all like the first time. It was, instead, like a dance to the music of a lilting sensuality. John was hard and demanding inside her, and yet they seemed to be moving in a dream, the world slowing to its limits of patience and consent. She could feel all of him, a smooth slender obelisk, reaching inside her, joining with its yearning the tendrils of her heart to the wisdom of her body.

There was no fear. No sense of hesitation. She felt that if now she could conceive--if now life began to grow inside her because of this moment, because her very soul felt touched, it would be a child beyond all others, a child of love.

The thoughts ached to escape her. "John--" she began in a whisper.

"Don't worry," he groaned, his voice ragged, his forehead filmed in sweat. "We're protected. I've got a rubber on. It's okay!"

He drew in his breath suddenly as though surprised, grunting like a pig on the end of a burning stick. Karen felt him come inside her, fall limp, suck air like a drowning man washed up on shore. She closed her eyes tightly, letting her feelings ebb with the tears that stroked her cheeks.

It was over and she lay in his arms. "What did you want to talk about?" he asked, sitting up, reaching for the glass of wine on the floor.

"Nothing. It doesn't matter now." She knew that this was not the time to talk, that Vavaris would not be listening.

"Good. I don't feel much like talking." He grinned down at her. "It was pretty good, eh?"

She nodded slowly, her eyes still closed. Vavaris saw the dry wash of a teardrop, like a faint scar, etched across her face. He looked at his watch. "What time do you have to be home?"

There was a long silence. Karen swallowed. "Early," she said at last.

"Then you'd better start dressing. It's getting late."

"I love you," Karen said.

Vavaris looked at her and a thin smile creased his lips.

"Yeah, same here," he said.

They dressed in silence. "Will you walk me home?" she asked as they were leaving the apartment.

"Uh-uh, not tonight, baby," Vavaris answered. "I've got this feeling it would be dangerous. Something could happen. I don't know what it is, but when I feel this way, I, uh, know it's better to play it safe. Better safe than sorry, right?"

She turned to go. "I'll see you tomorrow," Vavaris called after her.

He smiled as he watched her walk away, and remembered the touch of her body without the clothes that covered it. It was so easy if you just knew how to handle them, he thought. Karen

wouldn't give him any trouble. Like he said, sooner or later they learned to love it.

Stephen Chambers held open the door of the Tokyo with one hand and held the wide black umbrella with the other. Christina Arianakis stepped inside the brightly lit foyer of the restaurant and Chambers followed, the wet umbrella dripping rain on the carpeted floor. Christina gazed at the Japanese rickshaw that was the focal point of the foyer, while a smiling hostess checked their coats.

"The name is Chambers--reservations for two at 8:30," Stephen told the reservation host.

A kimonoed hostess, oriental in training and delicate in her dress and manner, led them up the broad staircase and past the several separate rooms that made up the Japanese steakhouse. She took them to one of the larger rooms at the far end of the wide corridor.

"Stephen--it's marvelous!" Christina whispered.

Chambers smiled. In the car on the way over he had asked her if she had ever eaten at the Tokyo, and had been pleased when she said she hadn't. First visitors were always impressed by the restaurant's uniqueness.

In the room at the end of the corridor were four large tables, each with space for eight seated diners. One of the tables was dark and empty, the overhead light above it extinguished. Another,

recently used, was being cleared by Japanese busboys in wide-armed blue jackets and red headbands. The table to which they were sermoniously led by the kimonoed hostess already seated six others, and its overhead light burned dimly, reflecting the gleam of its smooth metal center.

A fourth table, towards which all eyes were now directed, also contained its complement of eight, but now the overhead beam burned in full intensity, its focus falling upon a high-hatted chef who cooked all eight meals before his guests' astonished eyes.

Stephen whispered to Christina: "Each table gets its own chef. They're great to watch. Most of them have been imported from Japan after they've been trained to cook like recycled samurai. Watch those knives he works with, and you'll see what I mean."

Christina watched, intrigued, and minutes later when the chef of their own table arrived, the performance was repeated, and this time they watched it from front row seats.

The two meals--one steak, the other scampi--which they ordered separately but then shared, eaten with chopsticks, accompanied by warm saki, and topped with a desert of freshly-cut wedged pineapple, put Chambers and Christina at their ease. The evening had begun with a sense of tension, a certain uneasiness common to many first dates. But now it had mellowed, and they had begun to enjoy their own company.

They lingered over coffee and brandy. "It was really delicious," Christina said, complimenting Chambers on his choice of restaurants. "I'm glad we came." She paused and looked at him earnestly. "It was a bit of a surprise--your invitation, I mean--in the middle of the meeting and all."

"Just following a brilliant impulse," Chambers explained. "I was sitting at that meeting pretending to listen but secretly watching you instead, and at last I just couldn't resist." His explanation wasn't entirely truthful, but the lie was small and easily concealed. The date with Christina had been no sudden impulse bred of boredom. He had considered it for days, lingering on the details and the possibilities.

It had been a while since he had been on a date, and even longer since he had been involved with a woman. The year before he had been attracted to Anna Goodman, another member of the English department, but Reena had been around then, plaguing him and taking up his time. Anna had left Parkview in June, ending the small relationship that had developed over the year.

Chambers didn't like to admit it even to himself, but he was often lonely. He was tired of casual affairs and the strain of always seeking out new people, and of being available. He was tired, as well, of Reena's attempts to make them into something more than they were. He wanted a good relationship--to care for someone and be cared for in return. Perhaps Christina could be that someone. He wasn't sure.

Chambers liked Christina. He found her refreshingly unlike Reena Kellner. She was gentle and considerate. Too often, perhaps, she went out of her way to avoid controversy, preferring to remain on neutral ground and soothe the ruffled feathers on both sides of an issue. But on occasion Stephen saw in her flashes of an excitement he hoped to encourage and cultivate. It was worth a try.

When he had first thought of asking her out, he had carefully considered the impression to be made. They could have a few drinks, pleasant conversation, a visit to his apartment, more drinks, a delicate lingering kiss and then--who could tell?

He had studied the scenario, but what had held him back was his concern for the right means and moment to ask Christina for the date. Even though he knew she liked him, he was not certain--not one-hundred-percent certain--that she would readily accept, and because he dealt poorly with rejection he had waited nervously for the right moment to present itself. To his relief, the moment had finally arrived at a Friday afternoon union meeting.

They had both been sitting at the long central table in the staffroom, Christina a few seats down from him on the opposite side. The room was hot and quiet, and Sue Cashman, their union representative, droned on about cost-of-living increments and workload parity.

Chambers had written the note out of simple boredom, not,

at first, intending to send it. He had doodled a picture of a stick-thin man sitting down to a mountain of food topped by a candled cake. Will you have dinner with me tonight? He had scribbled beneath it. Christina would never have had to answer the question, and dinner would not have been that night, except at the very moment he had finished the note he had looked up at her, and Christina, almost simultaneously, as if on telepathic cue, had glanced back and smiled. Almost embarrassed, and feeling as though he had been caught in the act, like a young boy with his hand in the cookie jar, Chambers held up the note for her to see, folded it carefully into a tight square, and tossed it in her direction.

The note landed by her hand, and for the next few anxious minutes he tried intently to tune in on Cashman's deadly monologue. It was no use; the sound of his own blood hissed in the thin membranes of his ears, and Cashman's voice came and went like a pulse in a stethoscope. He didn't look at Christina, and only took his eyes off his own hands and the pencil they still held when his shoulder was tapped, and Dan McMillan, seated to his right, handed him the square of paper with his name now neatly scripted on its flat, white surface.

He opened it cautiously, afraid not only of the answer he might find, but that the scratch of the unraveling might bring forty pairs of mocking eyes in his direction.

A second figure had been added to his sketch. A female



figure; round and fat, dwarfing his helpless stick man. Beneath his question was an answer; Yes. But I'm on a diet.

He wrote back. I have friends in Weight Watchers. I'll arrange for a dispensation.

This time he watched her read it, smile, nod. He smiled back. The date was made....

Christina finished her coffee and took another look around the Tokyo. "What I really mean," she said, "is that I never expected you to ask me out. I always thought that you and Reena had some kind of--"

Chambers broke in. "Reena and I have as much in common as the tortoise and the hare. She was the tort and I was hair-brained for ever getting involved with her. Seriously Christina, whatever went on between Reena and me--and it wasn't much--has been over for a long time. It's just hard to unravel Reena's web, and I feel a little sorry for her sometimes, even if she brings it on herself.

"Believe me, there's nothing between the two of us except our many differences, and I'm sorry now that I didn't explain that ages ago."

In the restaurant parking lot a while later, Chambers pulled open the door of his TR-6, and held Christina's arm as she ducked into the low-slung sportscar.

"I like your car," Christina said as Chambers climbed in behind the wheel. "You must really feel like you're flying."

"Well, it's not the most practical car to have--not with our climate--but when I was a kid I always wanted a sportscar--couldn't get it out of my mind--so when I finally got a teaching job I just couldn't resist and bought the damn thing. I'm afraid though, that it was the foolish product of a young man's fancy. I'm going to sell it in the spring. Want to get an old man's car and settle down a bit. I'm not getting any younger, you know."

They reached Sherbrooke Street and turned west. Chambers' apartment was in Westmount, in the basement flat of an old dignified building just beyond Westmount Park.

Chambers was happy with his apartment, and considered himself lucky to have found it. Westmount was a good location--not a long drive from Parkview, and close enough to downtown to make it convenient.

The basement apartment had windows at shoulder level and pipes across the ceiling, but Chambers found them useful, hanging plants and decorations without having to nail the walls or ceiling. He had learned from the janitor that the pipes were remnants of days gone by when the apartment had not existed, and the basement had been used only as a storage area, and as the housing for the massive oil furnace, the hot water tanks, and the hydro-electric meters that were now condensed and contained in one small section of the basement behind heavy, metal firedoors.

Chambers had four rooms--two bedrooms, living room, kitchen.

The apartment was neat and functional, sparsely decorated, and save for a few oversized pillows used as lounging seats, lacking feminine flair.

The furniture was old and sturdy, and he had put to good use as chairs and bookcases the heavy wooden crates one finds on the streets of Chinatown when the trash is put out for collection.

His bedroom was more cluttered and more personal. It was the last room in a series of rooms that trailed in a line from the front door like pearls on a single string. The bedroom was blue, a different shade of blue than the darker bedspread and the oval rug. There was a double bed made from a foam mat placed across six of the sturdy Chinese boxes. One wall was a bookshelf, almost equally divided between soft and hardcover books.

Christina sat on the old couch in the living room while Chambers placed a record on the stereo.

"I have vodka, gin, cognac, amaretto, wine--what would you like?" he asked.

"I don't know. What are you having?"

"I thought I might try a little cognac."

"That's fine with me, Stephen."

They drank and talked and Chambers became amusing and Christina laughed. Finally, in the middle of a sentence, Chambers leaned over and kissed her--quickly, lightly--and then finished what he had begun to say. It was like dinner at the Tokyo, a proven technique, a well-practiced approach he had learned to judge

with a fair degree of accuracy. When Christina said nothing following his kiss, and because her lips had moved voluntarily beneath his own in the brief, feathery moment of contact, Chambers put down his glass and took her in his arms.

This time the kiss was longer, and Stephen felt his heart quicken with excitement. Then, before the kiss was done, Christina placed her hands on his shoulders and gently pushed him away.

"Stephen--please--I can't--"

"What's wrong?" Chambers asked in a puzzled voice. It was the first time he could remember having a mutual seduction come so far, go so according to schedule, and then grind to a halt, derail itself just as the track had been cleared for a fast trip home.

"I--" Christina sighed, resigned herself to her decision. "I just can't do it, Stephen. I can't have an affair with you. There is--there might be--someone else. Another man. I just couldn't handle it until I'm sure."

"What do you mean when you say there might be another man?" Chambers asked. "It sounds a little vague to me."

"We dated--over last summer. He's away now, but he'll be back. I'm not sure how I feel about him--or you--and I need time to think."

Chambers heard the hesitation and uncertainty in Christina's voice and recognized her sincerity. She was confused and his actions tonight--the date, the kiss--had not helped her. She had,

he felt, grown to like him since the new school year had begun, and it would be foolish to throw that away in a fit of impatience.

"I see," he said softly, his voice carrying a tone of saddened resignation he really didn't feel. "I'm sorry then about the kiss--I didn't mean to impose on you. I just wanted you to know that I like you. That I think you're a marvelous person, and that I've wanted to kiss you for a long time." \*

Chambers flattered her. Now that he knew there was another man her affection gained even greater value, and he saw the situation as a good chance to tell her things she might like to hear.

The conversation returned to its light, amusing beginnings, and when he drove her home he merely kissed her softly on the cheek and placed one hand gently on her knee. There was no need to speak any further of what had happened. There was, for both of them, a quiet understanding. As he swung his car around for the drive home, Stephen glanced up at the light in the apartment Christina shared with her parents. He knew it had been foolish of him to try to seduce her. She wasn't that kind of woman. It was simply that old and foolish habits were hard to break.

Chambers shrugged. "What will be, will be," he murmured.

On Saturday mornings, Elena Giannopoulos allowed herself the luxury of sleeping in until 9:00 o'clock. As she lay in bed she could hear her mother vacuuming the shag rug in the downstairs

den, and the radio playing softly in the kitchen.

It was warm in her white room, and she threw off the bed-covers. The sun pressed against her pale curtains and crept in around its edges, tinging the room with a soft yellow light that looked thick enough to hold.

Indian summer. A beautiful day. Elena propped her head against the pillow and watched the tiny molecules of dust dance in the beams of sunlight that scratched the braided alabaster rug on the floor beside her bed.

She had had a dream, but conscious memory grasped only faded fragments of its substance and she worked to remember. She knew that the dream had been about Stephen Chambers, and had, in part, been frightening, although Stephen had not been the cause of her fear. She could recollect little else.

Elena looked at the clock on her bedside chiffonier. 9:15. In a few minutes her mother would call and another predictable Saturday would begin. She sat up on the edge of the bed and slipped her feet into fluffy pink slippers. Might as well get a head start. She put on her robe and walked to the bathroom. Her younger brother, Vasillios, would be out playing, and her father would have already left for work.

Elena washed and then returned to her bedroom and lay down. She felt lazy and didn't want the day to begin. It felt good just to watch the sunbeams warm the floor.

She heard the vacuum stop and her mother's step on the stairs

as she came up from the finished basement where the family spent most of its time.

"Elena," her mother called in Greek from the kitchen, "time to get up."

Her family had been in Montreal for almost twenty years now, but her mother still felt uncomfortable conversing in English, and Greek was the mother-tongue of the home.

Elena didn't blame her mother for not learning more English. Her mother's life, and her father's as well, had been difficult for many years. Both had grown up in the small Greek village of Seykia to the south of Sparta, and had courted in the old ways with the approval of both families. Then her father had come to Canada--his uncle Dimitrios, already an immigrant living in Montreal--urging him to come and make something better of himself than a poor village farmer.

So her father had made the journey, leaving her mother behind, arriving in Montreal in February with the winter at its worst, living in a small back room in his uncle's apartment, working as a dishwasher in the Greek restaurant where Dimitrios was a cook, and struggling with the language--the two languages--of the city. Her father had told her of the hours he had spent walking the icy streets or reading and re-reading the letters that came from her mother--letters of love, written in a loneliness almost equal to his own; bittersweet reminders of what he had left behind for this frozen land; precious paper beads that linked him to what he

cherished most in all the world.

Elena knew about the letters. She had seen them once, accidentally, in a box in the closet of her parent's bedroom. Stiff, grey envelopes addressed to her father in her mother's delicate handwriting. She had never read them, never wanted to invade that secret, yearning time her mother and father had shared—but her mother had spoken so often of those difficult days that Elena could imagine the very words the letters still held after all these years.

It had been more than a year before her father had sent for her mother. Uncle Dimitrios found another apartment, a larger one, and the young couple stayed with the uncle and his wife and their three children for six more months, saving money for a wedding and a place of their own.

While they were unmarried, her parents had lived in separate rooms, and Elena had heard many times of how they had waited for their wedding night before they made love, and how her mother had brought her father a woman's greatest gift—her purity. Elena understood that the telling was meant to be significant to her own life.

Eleven months after the wedding Elena had been born, and seventeen, almost eighteen years had passed since then. Now a new arrival to the city was not alone. Now there was always someone, the Community, ready to lend a hand. The Greek people had come, and had gathered together to keep the old ways, the ways



that had come with the parents and were taught to the young. There were the churches, the radio programs, the friends and the relatives. And so her mother, after nearly twenty years, still talked of the purity of her wedding night and still felt uncomfortable speaking English.

Elena felt little discomfort over her mother's reluctance to give up the old ways. They had adopted enough of the new to ensure themselves of the comfort the city had to offer. They had worked and saved and bought this new duplex, living downstairs and renting out the top floor to a young Italian couple.

What concerned Elena was the fact she had once heard her mother mention to her aunt that the duplex could easily accommodate three families if the basement was separated from the upstairs. It had, after all, its own kitchen and bathroom. Elena was afraid she already knew what three families her mother meant. Her brother was only twelve, but he would get married eventually. And as for her? Well--it was the custom of the old ways that she be introduced to the proper suitors. That her father and her family arrange for her to find the proper husband and approve of him--his family, his prospects--in advance. Love was not really a consideration. Nor was happiness. Those were things that could come later--in due time. Security--that was the first and foremost. A better life for the children than the parents had. She and her husband--they would become the "third" family in the duplex.

Elena loved her mother. And although at times she feared her, feared her control and her surveillance, Elena understood that everything her mother did was done out of her own sense of love and caring, out of a need to protect those she loved from a world she didn't fully trust or respect.

Maria Giannopoulos, Elena's mother, was still trim and youthful at forty-two. The years of hard work that had followed her arrival in Montreal and her marriage to Angelos Giannopoulos had not drained her energy and quick vitality. She wore glasses now, and the edges of her eyes were lined where once the skin had been as smooth as apples, but little else had changed. She was a forceful woman, often stubborn and always meticulous, guiding her family with an iron will, elaborate planning, and a small touch of superstition.

"Elena," her mother said as she entered her daughter's bedroom. "Are you going to sleep all day? We have lots to do." She sat down on the edge of the bed and stroked her daughter's hair with her hand. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, mother."

"Elena," her mother said, glancing down at her daughter.

"There is something I've been meaning to ask you."

Elena's heart missed a beat. It was something in her mother's tone of voice. Something that alarmed Elena and flushed her cheeks. The diary! she thought in a moment's panic. She had been recording her feelings in her diary for several years now, and recently the

pages had been filled with her thoughts and emotions for Stephen Chambers. The diary was hidden away, but perhaps--.

"I was straightening out your desk yesterday, and I found this," her mother said. She reached into the pocket of her apron and pulled out a small clay medallion. "I haven't seen this before, did someone give it to you?"

"Oh mother!" Elena exclaimed, relief flooding her like a lamp in the darkness. "I've had it for ages--you've seen me wear it. Your memory must be going on you."

It was almost true. Elena had worn it before, but only once. She had bought it two weeks earlier as a present for Stephen Chambers. He had worn a similar medallion to school one day, and when Elena had admired it he had told her it was a favorite of his. She had bought this medallion as a gift soon after, hoping he would like it as much as the one he had worn; but once bought she had lost her nerve, grown too shy, and had decided to keep the medallion until Christmas, when a small gift to a favorite teacher would not seem out of place.

"I don't remember seeing it before," her mother repeated.

"I thought someone might have given it to you."

"Now why would anyone give me a gift? It's not Christmas. It's not my birthday."

"I thought perhaps a boy might have given it to you."

"Mamma! What boy? I don't know ~~any~~ boys."

"You know boys in school Elena, and at your age boys begin

to notice pretty girls."

"Momma, don't be silly. Like you said, they notice pretty girls. I'm safe."

"Now don't you be silly. You're a very pretty girl, and a lot of boys will be after you if you let them. That's why I want you to tell me if anything happens--if you meet anyone. A girl can't be too careful. It's only safe when you know a boy--when you know his family, or if your father and I know him. There shouldn't be any fooling around. Sometimes children can fool their parents--once, twice maybe--but not forever. Parents have a feeling for things like that. And then, my girl, watch out!"

"Mother, you're making it sound as though I'm planning to run off with someone."

Her mother stroked Elena's hair for a second time. "Oh, I know you have no secrets, Elena. And I know you would tell me if you were interested in someone. It's just that I want you to know how your father and I feel. We're Greeks, Elena, and the family is very important to us. We have to watch out for each other and make sure that none of us get hurt or do the wrong thing. What hurts one hurts all, and we don't want anyone speaking badly of us. You'll understand when you get older--when you have a family of your own to watch.

"Yes momma, I know. I know you and poppa care. And I'm grateful, I really am."

"Well then, get up!" her mother chided, "We're wasting time with this chitchat. We have shopping to do, and aunt Soula expects us for lunch." She stood and walked towards the door of the bedroom. "Your breakfast will be on the table."

"Yes, mamma," Elena answered. It was always the same. Saturday shopping. Pushing the cart around the crowded supermarket, her mother checking off her list, comparing prices on the labels, keeping tally of what was spent and what was still to buy. Elena could follow with her eyes closed, and rarely enjoyed it. She would prefer to stay home and do her schoolwork. The more she did on the weekend, the less she had to do the rest of the week.

But her mother enjoyed her company. She insisted Elena leave her books once in a while and do other things. Other things, Elena thought. What other things? All she was allowed to do was to shop with her mother or visit relatives. The visits were also a part of her Saturday. When the shopping had been done her family would descend on her aunt who lived a few blocks away, or perhaps visit her mother's cousin who lived within walking distance to the north of them. Or perhaps the relatives might visit them in turn, and she would be asked to amuse the children or watch the baby. Anything beyond that was taken for granted as out of the question. It was never even discussed.

Elena sighed. Things could be worse. She might have been sent back to Greece to find a "proper" husband. It had happened

to a friend of hers. The girl had finished grade eight and left for Athens in the summer. Elena got a card a few weeks later explaining that a marriage had been arranged. She had not seen Litza since.

Elena and her mother shopped, as they always did, at the large shopping center near their home. But to her surprise this Saturday morning was not quite the same as all the others. Elena couldn't quite make out what was different, but it began with a strange feeling on the surface of her skin, as though the hair on her arms was brushed by a sudden breeze. It made her self-conscious. She felt, somehow, that she was being watched; that somewhere in the crowd of carts and people a pair of eyes followed her, and a stare, like the stare of an animal from the darkness of its lair, surrounded and bound her in a web of scrutiny. She began to glance about, to look over her shoulder, but no one was there, only strangers going about their separate business.

"Are you alright?" her mother inquired. "You're acting funny today."

"What? Oh, no--I'm fine. Just fine."

"We have what we need," her mother said, inspecting the shopping list one final time. "If we hurry, we won't be late for lunch."

Elena sighed and lightly bit the edge of her lower lip. For a moment she wondered if she would spend all the Saturdays of her life in the supermarket, or if she would somehow have a different

life--find a man who wanted more of her than this--and leave the old ways, and her childhood, far behind.

It would be difficult for her mother to accept if she did leave the family. Her mother had made clear her hopes and expectations. Even now Elena knew how hard it would be for all of them. But there was something inside her--something that said she wanted more--something that made her yearn for her own life.

She began to daydream of Stephen Chambers, an activity she had turned to more and more of late. Thank heaven mothers were not able to read minds. With Stephen in her thoughts time went by quickly, and even Saturdays were not too hard to bear.

Elena often amused herself by trying to recall the exact manner in which she had fallen in love with her English teacher. It was a hopeless effort. It had occurred, she felt, over a long period of time, and was clouded by the confusion and excitement of her long infatuation. It pained her to imagine how very little she must mean to him, despite her own feelings.

After all, what difference did her feeling make? He could have any woman he wanted. All the female teachers in school liked him, that was obvious. Miss Kellner was always mentioning him to her classes--the "fun" they had together. It was hopeless to hope.

But what else was there? If she could fall out of love with him as easily as she had fallen in, the problem would be solved.

But she couldn't—it just didn't work that way, and the problem remained.

Recently though, a subtle, frightening new idea had flickered through her mind. Flickered, because when it first emerged, a cautious, fledgling thought, she had fled from it, banished it from consideration, trembling at its demands and implications from the very first moment it had occurred to her.

It was, in its simplest form, a plan that would make certain Stephen Chambers was well aware of how she felt--how she would always feel. The plan had no specifics, no steps to follow, no concrete form; it was rather a simple determination just to be around him, to remind him in every possible way of her existence. For her, high school was almost over. If they became friends now, perhaps they could remain friends later, and in June they wouldn't have to say goodbye forever.

Elena denied the idea for as long as she could, knowing that she could never force herself to be open with Stephen, that she could think about it as much as she wanted to, but that she could never act upon it.

But then, after suffering a string of sleepless nights, nights that found her crying silently into her pillow, she realized she would have to try, despite herself, or suffer the result of nervous despair. She had lost appetite, concentration, sleep. If she couldn't do it as herself--shy, quiet Elena--she would just have to pretend to be someone else--pretend to be



Karen--act the role she wanted to live out. Maybe then, behind the mask of an imagined personality, she could face the fear of rejection and carry out her hopeless, foolish plan.

#### Chapter four:

Stephen Chambers looked out over the rows of faces that stared back at him. His two grade eleven classes had finished their first reading of Hamlet, and discussion had begun. He liked to start the senior year of English with a difficult work, and Shakespeare's challenging drama more than qualified.

His students moaned and protested when he distributed the texts of the play, begging him to begin the year with some other work, something less difficult and less deadly, but he always ignored their hapless protests.

Most students, he had discovered, entered their senior year with a preconceived idea of Shakespeare that had led to an unwarranted prejudice. It was the language, Chambers presumed, or the image they had arrived at of the Bard's work being strictly for brains, a mystifying linguistic puzzle that university people had yet to decipher, much less common high school folk.

But once they had begun, once he had got them to see Hamlet as human experience, as a statement on the possibilities of the human spirit; and once they had begun to respond to the wealth of emotions the drama introduced, the prejudice was generally overcome and the play enjoyed.

That step taken, Chambers then faced his second task. As teacher, it was his obligation to direct his students beyond that first simple emotional enjoyment to a slightly more

cerebral understanding of How and Why and What it meant. The task was far from simple. The majority of his students were stretched to their intellectual limits long before the play had been explored in all but its surface features. Chambers worked and hammered simply to build a respectable knowledge of plot, structure and imagery. It was not his favorite approach--this clinical dissection of the play--and he would have preferred to leave its deeper exploration to later college courses, but the choice was not his to make. The provincial government created educational policy. The government set standards and exams. The government passed and failed students. Chambers was forced to cover all he could, never knowing what would be required on the final examination, aware only that he was responsible for outlining and exploring all of the possibilities whether students needed them or not.

It was always at this point, during the discussion and questioning, that he lost the interest of some of his students. Some just couldn't cope. Others were lazy. When he gave them concrete questions, written and detailed, and when they could use the text as reference, most would struggle to some level of competency. But now, when the questions were oral and spontaneous, answers were hard to find.

"Let me put it this way," Chambers said, rephrasing a question that had gone unanswered. "You've all read the play. The end, we agree, is tragic. Hamlet hasn't brought happiness

and prosperity back to Elsinore. Why then, are we willing to see Hamlet as a great and noble character?"

He waited for an answer. The room was quiet. He turned and looked out the tall lean windows of the classroom at the grey, metal cross on the peak of Mont-Royal. The sky, he noticed, was a flawless azure blue, and the Mountain rubbed the horizon like a single giant breast. From where he stood, confined in his classroom, staring through the dust-streaked window, the cross no longer seemed attached to the hill, no longer settled and immobile in its bed of concrete, but rather by a trick of light and dispersion seemed to float gently above it, etched on the backdrop of a faultless sky.

Chambers turned back to his class and smiled quickly as a hand was slowly lifted in response to his question.

The hand belonged to Elena Giannopoulos. Elena knew most of the answers, but generally waited until she was sure no one else wanted to speak before raising her hand.

"Elena?"

"I think that Hamlet's greatness doesn't lie in his being an active type of character--as his procrastination points out to us--but more--perhaps--in what we might call his spirit. I mean--his powers are limited--as are his opportunities to use them, and although the ending of the play--all those deaths--may appear to be a failing, or a failure on Hamlet's part--we still realize that his suffering--and the sympathy and pity

his suffering creates in all of us--are part of his virtues, and we realize that it is his very virtues, the things that make him a noble man, that keep him from immediate action."

A few students shook their heads in wonder. Chambers smiled, feeling the joy only a teacher can experience when a student knows.

"Some of us may not have followed you," he said. "Could you say a little more about why you call multiple deaths a hopeful experience?"

"Well," Elena began slowly, choosing her words. "As I tried to say before--it's hopeful in the sense that we experience the emotions of the play--love, fear, horror--whatever. We suffer with the characters. We see--we see right and wrong, honor and treachery, courage and dignity. We're confronted, in fact, with a range of--I guess you could call them possibilities--and we see for ourselves just how far the human spirit can go in terms of good as well as evil. To me, that's a message of hope. No matter how bad things get there's always someone, somewhere, ready to fight it."

"Thank you, Elena," Chambers nodded. He addressed the class. "I hope some of you took notes on what Elena has just said. I think it's worth remembering."

Chambers was grateful. He had been right in assuming that Elena would add some challenge and excitement to his class. She had not yet inspired the others as he hoped she might, but once

they had become accustomed to the exchange of ideas between himself and Elena, he could slowly coax them to join in and to hold their own. He has seen it happen before with other classes. The brighter students often brought out the best in everyone.

As for Elena, he had always known she was bright--perhaps even brilliant--but lately she had been outdoing herself. In the past she had reminded him of a younger Christina Arianakis, letting her shyness get the best of her, sitting safe and silent with the rest of the class, preferring to miss an opportunity to express herself than undergo the attention an answer would magnetize. But apparently that was no longer the case. She seemed to be changing. Not only did she participate in class--and Chambers felt that even he was sometimes challenged by her command of facts and her critical insight--but outside of class she had changed as well.

Lately she had begun to remain behind when the class had ended, and more often than not her conversation drifted around to relationships, love and morality. At first he had thought Elena had found a boyfriend, fallen in love, and being inexperienced and unsure was quietly seeking his advice. Then slowly it began to dawn on him that her questions, and their conversations, were directed more and more towards himself--his own life, his feelings--and that in subtle ways he was being flattered and complimented. It gradually occurred to

him that Elena was interested in someone--and that he was the someone.

It was not an unusual event. Teachers soon got used to having students both love and hate them. Students loved their teachers in much the same way they found it possible to love their doctors or their priests, and far less than they loved their singers and their TV actors. Students, those at least who didn't hate school and all that went with it, loved in their teachers what seemed mature and worldly to them. It was an affection that could be dealt or withheld on a whim, demanding nothing but what they cared to give. Teachers were used to being loved, and used as well to having that fragile affection whisked away, disappearing as easily and as quickly as it came.

And yet Elena herself didn't appear to be the kind of person who hung on a fleeting infatuation. She was still a girl--only seventeen--hardly a young woman, and yet she often seemed much older. It was her mind, of course, and somehow, because it was so clever, it had taught her to understand things she had not yet experienced; it had given her the gift of analysis and perception, and it had matured her before her time so that only her birth certificate said seventeen, while she, herself, seemed ageless, choosing to be what she cared to be with the freedom and abandon of innocence. Elena, he knew, had boundless potential, and he had seen it now in its quiet beginnings. It was no wonder he felt a quirk of satisfaction

in her admiration.

The bell sounded and the class emptied in small separate waves, flooding the hall like bursts of liquid from a small-necked bottle. Elena stood by his desk, her long hair curled on the sloping rim of her bosom.

Chambers looked up. "Thanks for the answer, Elena. For a moment I thought no one was going to say anything, and I would have felt we've all been wasting our time."

"I think people--the kids--are starting to understand the play," Elena said enthusiastically. "I hear them talking about it in the halls sometimes. You've really got them interested in Hamlet, and Shakespeare too. I think they're still a little afraid to speak up in case they're on the wrong track, but the more we do, the more I'm sure we'll all get into it."

Chambers smiled at the girl. "That's a strange thing to hear coming from you, Elena. You've had a reputation as the quietest girl in school, you know."

Elena tried not to avert her eyes from Chambers' gaze, failed, then looked up at him again. "I'm still shy--I always have been--I guess you know--but I'm trying not to let it get the best of me. I've discovered that getting what you want often means asking for it, and that's--that's what I'm trying to do, I guess."

"Well, you can be proud of yourself," Chambers said.

"You've done an admirable job so far. You've really come out



recently--a debutante of self-assurance, waltzing in the arms of a brave and gallant confidence."

"And if the band stops playing?" Elena asked slowly. And then, like a small caboose to a train of thought. "No, I'll be alright. I have a secret weapon."

"Animal, mineral, or vegetable?" Chambers inquired jestingly.

"Karen Hudak--person!" Elena explained. "The perfect model. Now I ask you--how do we learn what we learn? The answer--imitation and practice, you've said so yourself. So whenever I come up against a situation that makes me want to clam up and hide, I just ask myself what Karen would do. It almost always works, and I can keep on dancing."

"You know, you might even be smarter than I already think you are," Chambers said admiringly. "But speaking of Karen, where is she? She wasn't in class today."

"She had to leave at lunch," Elena explained. "Her mother had a hospital appointment and her aunt couldn't take her today, so Karen had to go. I don't think her mother likes to go alone."

"Any idea what's wrong with her mother?"

"No, I have no idea. I don't even think Karen knows. I just know that Mrs. Hudak has to go to the hospital a lot, and that Karen says that the doctors don't want her mother to exert herself at all."

"It must be hard on Karen," Chambers admitted.

"It is," Elena agreed. "Karen's father died when she was

young, and now they live alone. Her mother's on welfare so they don't have much money, and Karen has most of the household responsibilities as well as her schoolwork to take care of."

"That is quite a load--I didn't know," Chambers murmured. "But it's funny, you would think that with everything on her mind, Karen wouldn't want to get mixed up with a character like John Vavaris. You would think she had trouble enough."

"Well, you know," Elena said. "I think that John is sort of a safety-valve for Karen. She's under a lot of pressure, and she can get some of it out of her system with someone like John."

"The price might be more than it's worth," Chambers mused. "I think Vavaris causes more trouble than he cures. Is she still seeing a lot of him? At least he seems to be staying out of trouble lately."

"They were--sort of fighting for a while, but I think things have been patched up," Elena explained. "Karen doesn't talk to me very much about John--I think she thinks I don't like him--so I really don't know much about what's going on between them."

"Let me ask you, Elena," Chambers said, "do you like John Vavaris?"

"Uhhh--no--I guess I don't really. But I can't tell Karen that because she's never asked me, and her affair is none of my business."

"I suppose you're right," Stephen agreed. "And I guess we just keep our fingers crossed, although it hasn't seemed to do much good up to now."

He checked the clock at the back of the room and discovered that the school day had been over for ten minutes. "My lord, The day actually ended without my counting down the minutes or realizing it was over. Will miracles never cease!"

They walked down the emptying hall together, and Chambers stopped at Elena's locker as she collected her homework.

"Which way are you heading?" he asked.

"I usually take the metro north and catch the Gouin Boulevard bus," she replied.

Chambers realized he had nothing to rush home to except a TV dinner. "Can I give you a lift to the metro?" he offered.

"No--really--you don't have to--"

"I know I don't have to," Chambers said, "but I'd like to if you'll let me."

Elena nodded and turned back to her locker for one more book.

"If that's all homework," Chambers remarked, "you'll be up all night."

"Tell that to some of the teachers around here," Elena complained. "Some of them think we have nothing to do with our lives but their homework assignments." She lifted the heavy bookbag.

"Would you like me to carry that?" Chambers asked.

"No, that's okay--I'm used to it. If I don't graduate from high school I can always get a job as a circus weightlifter."

They both laughed, the sound echoing happily in the empty corridor.

They rode to the metro with the roof down on the Triumph. Chambers wore his grey tweed sports cap, and Elena's hair blew carelessly in the wind.

Her heart beat quickly, an impetuous, feral cadence to the muffled song of the Triumph's engine. It wasn't like being near him at school. It was different--it was out--in the air, with the wind rushing by and the car slipping from sunlight to shadow as the buildings blinked past them.

Elena felt an impulse to reach out and touch the man beside her. He was a stranger really, and yet she felt she knew him. How many hours had she sat in his classroom and listened to him teach. And she had loved them all because they meant she had been close to him. Those hours had been her romance, and because that had been the sum of it, it had satisfied her. Until now.

She lifted her hand to her hair and moved the blowing strands from her eyes. She glanced at Chambers cautiously, watching his profile in the shadow of his cap, loving the strength of its ragged contour.

In his mirror, Stephen saw her watching and smiled as he pulled the car to the curb in front of the metro. During the

ride he had been thinking.

"You know, Elena," he said. "What Parkview really needs is a good school newspaper. Somewhere teachers and students could exchange views and ideas--even complaints--like too much homework. I was just wondering if you would like to help me get it started."

The idea of a student newspaper had struck Chambers quite suddenly while he was thinking of Elena at home pouring over her books. He realized that the only time she had ever stayed after school had been for play rehearsals the previous spring, and it was then, far more than in the classroom, that he had come to know her. Something like a newspaper might give him a chance to see more of her real personality--the other part of her that was there--the non-academic part of her that was both girl and woman wrapped up in one package. It couldn't do any harm. The school really could use a newspaper, and he was sure old man Griffen would go for it.

"I don't know--" Elena stammered. "It--it sounds wonderful, but I--I would have to think about it--I don't know--right now I mean."

"That's alright," Chambers assured her. "It's just an idea. Take your time. Think about it."

"I will. I will think about it."

"And one more thing," Chambers said, smiling again. "Do you think you could bring yourself to call me Stephen?" Mr.

Chambers sounds a bit stuffy to me."

Elena held in her excitement. "I'll try, if you like-- but I'll probably forget."

"Just takes a little practice," Chambers reassured her. "See you tomorrow, Elena."

Chambers drove off, and Elena, standing on the curb, whispered aloud, "Goodbye--Stephen."

She turned and walked towards the escalator that would take her down to the metro. She was thinking of a school newspaper, and how she would have to stay after school and work on it with--with Stephen. She felt the pulse of her heartbeat in the hollow behind her ear. Her heart was still pounding as it had been during the ride in the car, and she had to calm herself before she got home. If she mentioned the newspaper to her mother there would be questions, and she would have to have the answers. "Oh heart, be still," she murmured.

Reena Kellner sat at her desk thumbing through the grade eleven history text while the class settled down. The students came into the classroom in small bunches, talking and laughing. Reena closed the book with a sharp bang, but it went unnoticed in the noisy room.

Reena didn't feel like teaching. Her head ached with a dull insistent pain that was jailed somewhere deep inside her skull, immune to the relief usually provided by the three aspirin

she had swallowed for breakfast. The babble of voices irritated her. Kids had no feelings. They should have noticed she wasn't well. They just didn't care. No one had even asked her how she felt. Couldn't they see that her head felt drum-tight, that her skin felt like a plastic bag that pressed in on the bones of her skull, squeezing down until she grew sick and dizzy just from the effort of breathing.

No, they couldn't see! Only she knew. Just like she was the only one who knew about her fight last night. The bastard! What kind of man was he? How could he tell her it was over when it had just begun. When she had begged him not to leave her. The bastard! He hadn't cared so much for his wife when they had first met, when he had been so damn anxious to make love he had come before she had even felt him inside her. The stinking pig!

And what did they care--these kids and their stupid games. She was the only teacher in the goddamn school who understood them, who was on their side against all the other idiots who taught here, and they didn't have enough fucking consideration to even care if she was dying--.

"Hello Miss Kellner. How are you today?"

Reena looked up, surprised, thrown off the track of her thoughts which had, but a second ago, led her to the very edge of an anger tantrum that other classes had experienced when she was hung over and annoyed with them.

"Oh--it's you." Reena said, glancing up to see John Vavaris watching her, a look of concern on his face. "I was just--I have a headache--it'll be alright in a minute." She tried to smile. "My doctor gave me special pills--they should work soon."

John Vavaris was very good-looking. Some people said he was lazy and only went to school because he had nowhere else to go. But they were wrong. She had brought out the real John Vavaris. He worked in her class, did what she wanted him to do, got good grades, and all because she knew how to handle him, how to treat him like a person--a man--not like a kid who couldn't think for himself or handle responsibility.

That was where they went wrong in this school. They coddled the wrong kids--kissing ass for the mommas' boys and the little ladies, ignoring kids with the potential to be alive-- really alive--the independent, mature kids who learned more outside of school in a week than the others would learn from books in their whole lives.

The problem was that this was a school for girls. The girls this, and the girls that, hurray for the goddamn girls! My God, what did they see in those silly, stupid things who giggled and screeched and teased, hiding the fact that beneath their skirts and their lily-white panties they wanted it as much as anybody else.

Oh, but they couldn't admit they wanted it. Oh no, anything but the truth! And pretty soon it was too late, and they grew



up to be like the rest of the stupid women on this staff. Stiff old crows with sandpits between their legs.

And the men were no better--the men told them they were such good girls, such nice women, and how much they loved them and marry me please darling because you won't fuck around with anyone else darling no matter what I do!

Who were they trying to fool? The girls flaunted themselves, pretending they didn't know any better, and the men secretly chased them with their dicks twitching like dog tongues, giving them good marks because they accidentally brushed up against them with their little boobs or forgot to close their legs beneath their desks, giving the dogs a good sniff.

But she knew! And she could do something. Even the score. Play the game by their rules. Fuck the hypocritical bastards who condemned her with their pious platitudes while they beat off to their fantasies. Fuck them all!

"Are you okay, Miss Kellner?" Vavaris asked.

Reena looked at him, her eyes coming back from a long way off. "I don't feel like teaching today," she rasped.

Vavaris sat at the desk nearest her own. He was staring at her and she felt self-conscious. In the mirror that morning she had seen the dark rings under her eyes, and the pallor of her skin had made her feel that cigarette ash had somehow seeped through her pores and stained her flesh. Make-up didn't hide it.

"It's a hangover," she explained to Vavaris in a low, conspiratorial voice. "and I didn't get much sleep last night."

Vavaris looked at her closely. She looked sick. As though she should be home in bed. "So don't teach," he said. "Take it easy today."

"I think that's a good idea," Reena agreed. "We're ahead of everybody else in the school anyway. I'm the only one who knows how to teach around here."

Reena looked out at the class and waited. They continued talking, taking no notice of her. "Will you all shut up!" she yelled, bringing her fingers up to press against her temples. "Just shut up!"

The class fell silent, glancing sideways at one another as they straightened out in their seats. They knew better than to argue when Kellner was in one of her moods.

"I'm not going to teach a lesson today," Reena said. She paused, waiting for the reaction. Except for two boys in the back of the room who threw up their arms in celebration, the class was quiet, waiting to see what was in store for them. Sometimes when a teacher didn't teach you got a free period. With Kellner it was hard to say.

"I've decided that today, despite the fact that I didn't get any sleep last night, I would listen to your complaints and report them back to the office. I realize that students get a goddamn raw deal--that sometimes they need someone to

be on their side once in a while. I know what it's like. I'm the only one taking the students' side and I get a lot of crap for it. But I don't give a damn. So if you have any bitching to do, this is the time and place for it."

The room was silent."

"Someone must have something to say," Reena insisted.

Jimmy Kalinos, a student known as a class comedian, raised his chubby hand. "The food in the cafeteria smells like gym socks," he said with a straight face while several of the girls began to titter."

Reena stared at him for a moment and then exhaled deeply. "I don't want to talk about things like the food in the cafeteria," she said. "If you don't like it, don't eat there! Now who else has a complaint?"

Mary Trogadis did. "Why do we only get ten days Christmas holiday this year? Last year we had twelve."

Reena threw back her head in exasperation. "Why do you ask such stupid questions?" she said nastily. "The School Board sets the holidays, not us! Is that all you people have to worry about--cafeteria food--holidays! Everything else is perfect? You're just all so happy and content--" She waited. There was no response, just a hard silence. "Well I'm happy for you," she said. "Everything is so perfect. But just remember when something goes wrong--when the crap hits the fan--you had your chance and you blew it." She sat down and

yanked open the history textbook.

Minutes passed slowly as the class waited to see if Reena would give them work to do. When she didn't, they began to whisper among themselves.

After a while, Vavaris spoke quietly to Reena. "I guess there really are a lot of things to complain about, Miss Kellner. It's just kind of hard to think of them right off the bat."

Reena looked at him, still angry. "There is so much wrong with this school it should be burnt to the ground," she said in a low, fierce whisper. "I have stories I could tell you about what goes on in this place--and you give people a chance to get out some of their complaints and they have nothing to say."

"Maybe people feel it's no use even trying--that things won't change no matter what anybody does," Vavaris said.

"Well, they're wrong," Reena insisted. When some people talk--others listen. Mr. Griffen respects my ideas. He says I'm the only teacher he's ever had who has consistently come up with good ideas for improving the school. The only one! They listen to me, alright. They're afraid I might transfer to another school. They don't want to lose me."

"No, we don't want to lose you either, Miss Kellner," Vavaris said solemnly. "The school wouldn't be the same without you."

"You'd better believe it," Reena said emphatically. "The other teachers<sup>3</sup> never hassle the pretty outside girls, but they'll

try to screw the rest of you if you're not careful."

"Yeah, it sure is good we have you around, Miss Kellner," Vavaris said quietly. He consciously put a look of deep concern on his handsome face. "And I'm sorry you're not feeling well. Is there anything I can do?"

Reena shook her head, her fingers pressed against her temple. "It's just a headache," she said painfully. She looked up to see Elena Giannopoulos standing by her desk. Elena was the class brain, but Reena marked her critically to prevent her from feeling too superior.

"Miss Kellner, if we're not going to do any work this period, may I go to the library?" Elena asked.

Reena looked at her strangely. "All work and no play makes Jill a dull girl," she said flatly,

Elena dropped her eyes and didn't respond.

"No, you can't go," Reena said in a sharper tone. "The librarian has enough problems without extra people coming into the library. Just sit at your desk and wait for the bell." She turned back to Vavaris. "Now where were we?"

"I was just saying that I'm sorry you're not feeling well," Vavaris reminded her.

Reena smiled. She felt better already. John's attention seemed to just be the medicine she needed. He was a good kid. "Oh, I'm feeling a lot better," she said.

"Would you like some water or something?"

Reena shook her head. "No, nothing." She searched his tanned face with her eyes and then signaled with her finger that he should move closer to her desk.

"John," she said in a low voice. "I've been looking for someone like you. You're a good kid. Someone I know I can trust. There is something you can do for me. A little job. I'd be glad to pay you."

"Sure, Miss Kellner. Anytime. You name it."

"Well, what I'd like you to do—if you don't mind—is to help me move some furniture around in my apartment. I'd like to redecorate a little, but I can't move the heavy stuff on my own. Do you think you could come over sometime and give me a hand?"

"Like I said, anytime at all Miss Kellner."

"Thank you, John," Reena said politely. "Oh, and you don't mind, eh? I mean you aren't afraid of what people might say or anything."

"What are they going to say?" Vavaris said, shrugging his shoulders.

"You never know with some people," Reena said harshly.

"The big mouths we have around here. Maybe it would be a good idea if we just kept this whole thing under our hats, okay?"

"Sure. Yeah. Okay—no sweat," Vavaris agreed.

Reena smiled. Vavaris was showing a gratifying amount of interest in paying her a visit. It could prove interesting.

She really didn't need her furniture moved, but maybe a change wouldn't hurt. Especially when the mover was as good looking as John Vavaris.

Reena searched for something more to say. She wanted her conversation with Vavaris to continue.

"How are you and Karen Hudak getting along?" she asked casually.

"Karen? Oh--okay, I guess," Vavaris said hesitantly. His instinct told him he should not appear to be too close to Karen. "She's kind of hard to--ah--get along with sometimes," he continued. "We don't always have the same ideas about things, but it's okay, I guess."

"Between you and me," Reena said, "I don't think she's exactly your type. She's too young for you. Someone like you needs somebody who knows what's happening."

Vavaris nodded. "It's funny, Miss Kellner, but sometimes I think the same thing. Karen is a sweet kid, but sometimes I don't think she knows what's going on."

"That's the difference between a 'sweet kid' and a 'woman'," Reena said slowly as she arched her thin, curved eyebrows.

The class whispered quietly while John and Reena continued their private conversation. They were surprised when the bell in the hall clanged noisily as the period came to an end.

"Read the next chapter for tomorrow," Reena shouted after the students crowding through the door. She turned back to

Vavaris who was still in the seat by her desk. "I'll let you know about moving the furniture," she said.

Later that day, at lunch, Reena made her way through the noisy throngs of students in the halls and entered the teachers' cafeteria at one end of the school basement. She sat without comment in a seat close to Christina Arisanakis and Pat Ender, who greeted her casually and continued their own conversation.

Reena ate part of her lunch, a cheese sandwich, and pushed the rest aside. She still carried the anger that had plagued her during her senior history class, but the thought of John Vavaris brought a smile to her lips.

"Goddamn men," she said at last.

Pat and Christina turned to look at her, uncertain if she had addressed her remark to them, or to the world in general.

"You never know what to expect from them," Reena continued, now speaking directly to the other two women. "One minute they love you, and the next minute they act like they don't even know your name. We're just lucky that there are plenty to go around—like fish in the sea. For every one that goes belly up, there's a hundred more biting at the bait."

Pat and Christina remained silent. They were not certain why Reena had suddenly begun her tirade against men, and because it was a common refrain, one they had often heard in the past, they waited to see if she expected a reply.



Reena sighed. "I'm sorry," she explained. "I hate to sound bitchy, but this guy I was seeing turned out to be a bastard, and it just pisses me off that you can never trust a man."

"Geez, I'd hate to go that far," Pat said lightly. "I'm certainly no defender of male chauvinism, but some of them are fairly human. Not most, of course, but some."

"I don't believe it," Reena insisted. "I've yet to meet a man who was decent."

"Well, how about your father?" Pat inquired. "A lot of women like their fathers, and they're certainly men."

"My father was a bastard!" Reena exclaimed. "The first of many."

"Well, I still have to agree with Pat," Christina offered. "You can't write off all men just because you happen to have run into a few of the bad ones."

"A few? Who's talking about a few? I'm talking about a long endless list, with no exceptions," Reena said. "Oh, I know it's easy for you to talk—you've spent your life in an ivory tower. You don't know what men are like."

"And Pat—what about you? In your thirties. Still unmarried. Obviously men haven't made much of an impression on you, either."

"Just you wait, Christina. You'll see. You probably feel pretty happy and secure with your little affair with Stephen—oh, don't look surprised—it's no secret—we all have eyes."

You probably think that Stephen is different--that he's one of the good guys you so happily imagine. Well, just remember who had him before you. I'm talking from first-hand experience, and I can tell you that he's no different from any of the rest of them. Wait and see. He'll take what he wants, rummage around under your skirt until someone else comes along, and then goodbye Charlie."

Pat cut in harshly. "Reena! What a lousy thing to say. You're not exactly being fair. You can't just condemn a Relationship like that--basing it on what happened to you."

"Okay! Look--I was just trying to be helpful," Reena said defensively as she stood up from the table. "Maybe she can hang on to Stephen Chambers--maybe she can! But I just wouldn't bet on it." Casually, without another glance at the others, Reena left the cafeteria.

Christina sat silently, her eyes downcast, embarrassed.

"Don't listen to any of that nonsense," Pat told her.

"Reena isn't happy unless she can upset somebody. I just hope that someday she chokes on her own foot."

Pierre Bernot, a dapper, grey-haired science teacher had been sitting at the far end of the table. "Was she drinking again?" he asked, having overheard the conversation.

"Very possibly," Pat said sternly. "With Reena it's getting hard to tell."

Bernot frowned. He had been among the many who had recently

noticed that Reena Kellner was not always entirely sober. Several times in the recent past she had been late for class, and on occasion her speech had been noticeably slurred. It was a disgrace, Bernot thought. A shameful disgrace.

When Reena left the staff dining hall, she made her way upstairs to the coatroom and went directly to her locker. On the top shelf, behind a stack of history textbooks, was a red and black thermos. Standing by her locker, she looked around cautiously, and seeing no one, opened the bottle and filled the plastic cap with an amber liquid. She drank quickly, in large, burning gulps, the whiskey flooding her throat and burning its way into her stomach.

Better, she thought. Much better. She drank again, watching the hand that held the red thermos cap. Steady as a rock, she thought, her mind already feeling the first effects of the alcohol. It was her personal opinion that one of the great joys of juicing was the fact that the world stopped jumping around and settled down to a manageable blur.

I accept your congratulations, she said silently to the thermos cap. I did not touch one single drop before lunch, and I wouldn't even take you now if I didn't know how lonely you get without me. Besides, you can't blame me, really.

Walking out on me--after two months--the bastard! The rotten --lousy--bastard! So you can't blame me. No--you can't. In

times like this a woman needs a little cushion to lean on--a little crutch to hold on to until things straighten themselves out. Just for a while. Just for a little while.

She looked at the thermos in her hand. Remember that, you smart-ass thermos. I don't really need you--so just watch yourself. I only ~~like~~ you because we only live once--you hear that? We only live once--that's the reason I like you. 'Cause if we only live once, we may as well be nice and mellow while we're doing it.

Reena took one last swallow, the small remains of an ice cube slipping between her teeth, and then replaced the thermos behind the stack of books.

She sighed and smiled to herself. She had two classes to teach this afternoon. Maybe they would talk instead--or play something. The kids liked to play games. She smiled again. Either way it would be a pleasant afternoon.

Robert Petersen walked across his empty driveway and entered the big house from the side door off the carport. As he entered, he called out to his wife in a familiar, bantering way. "Julie, I'm home! What's for dinner?"

There was no answer, but Petersen could hear the soft whir of the washing machine in the basement and realized that Julie was probably downstairs and couldn't hear him.

For a moment the thought flashed through his mind that

the door to the house should be locked when Julie was alone and couldn't hear anyone knocking. But he knew she was still a small-town girl at heart, and that even years in the big city hadn't changed her enough to keep doors locked in the daytime.

Petersen kicked off his shoes and sat in the cushioned antique rocker in the living room. The mail was on the small maple chairside table, and he glanced through it. Bills. A letter from his brother in Calgary. A subscription renewal for Time magazine.

He closed his eyes and with effort relaxed his neck and shoulders. It had been another long day, and the muscles in his back were tight and sore.

"Oh, you're home," Julie said, passing the living room with a load of dried and folded laundry. "I didn't hear you come in."

"I called, but the washer was going. How are you?"

"Oh, I'm fine. If you can consider doing laundry fine. How was your day on the battlefield?"

Petersen sighed. "Same as usual. A number of casualties. A skirmish won—a skirmish lost. Plenty of battle fatigue."

"Would you like a cocktail before dinner?" Julie asked.

Petersen murmured his approval and Julie nodded. "Good, I'm in the mood for one myself. I'll just put the laundry upstairs and be right back."

Petersen stirred himself away from the comfort of the rocker and went to the hide-away bar tucked inside one end of the stereo console. He began to mix a batch of potent daquiris, Julie's favorite.

Julie came into the living room and found him preparing the drinks. "You didn't have to get up," she said, "I'm a passable bartender."

"I was brought up never to ravage my bartender," Petersen chided, "so I wasn't taking any chances. Besides," he added, "if I let you do everything, I'll lose my independence." Julie laughed as he pulled her close and kissed her.

They sat in the living room and lingered over their cocktails. There was no rush for dinner, and it could wait until they were ready. Although they lived in a large house with three upstairs bedrooms, the Petersens were childless, and had bought their home simply as a financial investment.

"Any more progress with that Costa character you were telling me about?" Julie asked.

"Saw the father today," Petersen sighed. "He had to take time off work to come in. He was really angry with the boy, cuffed him soundly right there in the office."

"The father hit him right there in front of you?" Julie asked in surprise.

Petersen nodded. "Slapped him across the head until the boy started crying. I was embarrassed. I didn't know what to

do. And I think it's only the beginning. Costa will probably get a lot more of the same at home tonight."

"Do you think it will do any good?" Julie wanted to know.

"Do you think this Costa will start behaving himself?"

"Who knows?" Petersen shrugged. "We try it all--psychology, bribery, friendship. What works one time may not work another. Even violence--that faithful last resort--doesn't seem to have the effect it once did. When we had finished with Costa and sent him back to class, the father broke down, cried like a baby. I could feel the frustration and the anger in him. In the old days, back in Greece, the father ruled with an iron hand and the kids toed the line or else. But here in the Promised Land, the kids aren't so afraid. They see a lot of other options, and even the beatings don't hold as much sway as they once did.

"We need a little something--a way to get through to these kids somehow. It's a sad commentary on our situation when violence is our final answer." He raised his hands palm upwards and shrugged again. "We'll have to see what happens from here on in."

Julie Petersen looked at her husband. His face was drawn, and his eyes were tired, despite it being only supper time. He was taking his job seriously, and the hectic pace was taking its toll in return.

"You look tired," she said sympathetically.

"I guess I am," Petersen replied. "I guess I am."

It was still early in the school year but he could already begin to reflect on what he had learned since coming to Parkview High. It wasn't that Parkview was so very different from Weston, his old school. Even with the difference in language and habits and class structure, problems were much the same from place to place, and what you found in one school you could count on finding in another.

No, that wasn't the difference. The difference lay mainly in the fact that now he was a vice-principal, an administrator, and like Alice-in-Wonderland he had to deal with a new perspective in the looking glass.

The first day he had met the staff--the day he had given his speech of introduction--his classroom philosophy had been his theme. He had talked about working together as a team, about humanizing the school system and sharing responsibility. They were things he had talked about before--but only as a teacher. As a vice-principal he had hoped they might be put into effect.

They hadn't. The staff had been a bit skeptical and a bit cynical from the very start. They already knew their responsibilities, and they weren't looking for any new ones. Petersen had seen it happen before. Some teachers--a sizable number he was certain--were not in the profession for purely altruistic reasons. They were there because they liked the holidays, or because it was secure work, or perhaps because in the long run they just weren't qualified or talented enough for anything else.



It was teachers like those who opposed any shift in the status quo. They liked to leave at 3:30 sharp, rushing off to second jobs or night classes that would earn them more money, always in a hurry to get away from the problems and the students they dealt with at Parkview, and back into their own lives.

It had angered Petersen at first. He disliked the attitude that what teachers did in the classroom was enough for the money they earned. It had angered him that some teachers hated to do anything that wasn't outlined in their contract and paid for in cold, hard cash.

"You know, Julie," he said at last. "A school is a funny place. It might have only six--seven hundred people in it, but it's just as if someone had taken the world and squeezed it into a little ball and stuffed it through a Parkview window. Good, bad, justice, tyranny--it's all there under the microscope. Every day there's a new crisis or a new villain or a new thing--a supernova--that fades and vanishes before you've had any more than a chance to sniff it out. And I'm just sitting there on top of it all wondering if I can keep the whole thing perculating safely, or whether I've got another Krakatoa on my hands just waiting for that last ounce of pressure before it blows me sky high.

"It's that kind of feeling that ruins this job. You're so busy tending the whole damn volcano that it's hard to notice all the little cracks that could use some individual mending.

or even the few odd flowers blooming in the shadows.

"I guess--I guess I'm tired. But I really don't care about that. I've always wanted a chance to change things, and now I have it. If it wears me down--well, so be it. At least I'll have had my chance.

"I guess this job is really like a crucible of sorts. They pour you in all hot and liquid and fiery, and you come out--what? A sword? A plowshare? I wonder what strange effect it will have on me? "

"Your head, Mr. Petersen, is far too hard for anything to change." Julie said lightly as she eased her husband from his thoughtful speculation. "Lean forward you big lummock, and I'll massage your shoulders for you. I think tonight you should have your dinner, a hot bath, and off to bed--with me, of course. You're not getting off that lightly." She moved behind her husband and gently worked her fingers along the stiff muscles of his shoulders.

Petersen closed his eyes. It was good to be home. "Behind every happy man is a clever woman," he sighed. No matter what happened at Parkview, there was always Julie. Only Julie could make him forget about the school. For a little while anyway.

Chapter five:

Bobby Bower woke at the first sound of the alarm in his parents' bedroom. He had been dreaming. A nasty, frightening dream in which he had been laughed at and spit upon while his hands and feet were tied and he was unable to fight back.

Curling into a tight ball under the covers, Bobby listened as the man who slept with his mother roused himself slowly from bed, and with small shuffling footsteps made his way to the bathroom down the hall where he urinated loudly.

Bobby never got up until his step-father had left the house and closed the door behind him; but now, quietly, he lifted back the covers and felt under the bed with his feet for the socks he had thrown there the night before.

Wearing only the socks and the loose white undershorts he wore to bed, and shivering slightly in the cool morning air, Bobby tiptoed to the windowsill where he kept the jar of worms and flies. While he waited he would feed his pet toad.

Bobby took worms from the jar. Then, wiping the dirt from his fingers on a discarded tee-shirt that lay on the floor, took the toad in his hands and returned to bed. Lying beneath the sheet, he gently stroked the toad's soft belly, and with his eyes closed fell into a hazy, comfortable daydream.

It was a daydream he had enjoyed before, one he never tired of.

He is a secret agent for the government, trained and skilled in detection and deceit. It is his job to weed out evil and expose it for all to see, To bring to Justice those people who are mean and unkind, and who bring harm to others.

And he is a lawyer as well as a secret agent. He is the best lawyer in the country, and is always asked to prosecute the criminals he has captured.

The criminals have no hope. He has never lost a case. With brilliant logic and argument he shatters the defence until he gets his confession.

Often the guilty cry and whimper, begging on their knees for mercy. But he only laughs. There can be no mercy. No forgiveness. Justice prevails.

As an honor for the job he has done so well time and again, he is asked to assist in the execution of the condemned. He stands on the scaffold and ties the noose tightly around the villian's pulsing neck. Then his hands drop to the lever of the trap door that separates the guilty from the arms of extinction.

Slowly he pulls off the black hood he has been wearing and begins to laugh at the shock and horror that appears on the faces of the doomed as they recognize their executioner. He continues to laugh, louder and more joyously as he pulls the lever of the trap door and the body falls, the neck breaking with the dry crack of kindling, the dangling feet dancing away the last few seconds of life in the strange and rhythmic embrace

of death.

"That's how it's gonna be, Hermie," Bobby whispered to the toad as he softly stroked its cold, dry skin. "Someday they won't laugh. Nobody'll laugh. They'll beg me on their knees. An then I'll laugh, Hermie. I'll laugh and I'll laugh and I won't forgive them. They'll beg and they'll cry and I'll still make them pay, Hermie."

Bobby reached beneath the bottom of his mattress and took out a small object wrapped in masking tape. "See what I got, Hermie? It's the keys. The keys that open every door in the whole school. I got 'em real easy, Hermie. Nobody saw me. I just walked in the office and there they were, I was mad, Hermie, and I saw 'em laying there and I took 'em.

"I remember I was talkin' to Miss Arianakis--it was just before lunch--and I wanted to ask her if she liked me, Hermie. That's all I wanted. I just wanted to know if she liked me, 'cause I like her a lot. She never laughs, Hermie. She wouldn't laugh at anyone--not even you, Hermie--even if you had no legs and jumped around on your belly, she wouldn't laugh at you.

"And I wanted to ask her, Hermie. But stupid Mr. Chambers came in, talking away like he always does and spoiling everything. And I got mad. Boy I got mad! And I run out into the hall and I run to see Mr. Petersen, the vice-principal, to tell him that Mr. Chambers is stupid and a no-good teacher, but when I get to the office it's empty. No one's there, Hermie. The

secretaries are off doing somethin'. And then I see 'em. I see the keys laying on the desk. The master-keys, Hermie. And I know if I steal 'em the school would be in real trouble, and I don't want to do that—I don't want to give the school trouble—not Miss Arianakis and some of the others—only Mr. Chambers.

"But I know if I just borrow 'em, Hermie. If I just borrow the keys and have copies made, I could return 'em and still have 'em, Hermie. And then sometime I could sneak into Mr. Chambers class and mess it up and pay him back for spoiling everything.

"So I did it, Hermie, and I have the copies right here—the keys to every door in the school." Bobby waved the thin tape-wrapped package in the face of the unblinking toad. "Someday, Hermie," he said. "Just you wait and see."

In the kitchen his step-father coughed, and almost against his will Bobby began to listen as the man went through his morning ritual. Every morning was the same, and Bobby had long ago learned its pattern. He hated laying awake in bed listening to his step-father getting ready to leave for work, and this morning, because of the daydream, because he had so clearly imagined his revenge, it was worse than usual.

Bobby squeezed his eyelids closed but he could not escape the image of his step-father pressed tightly on the lining of his mind. The man in the image wore faded boxer shorts with a loose, open gap where a fly should be, a sleeveless tee-shirt

and a pair of old plastic slippers worn through at the soles. He had a morning stubble of beard--a sprinkling of black and white growth--and his hair, thin and spotted with grey, was mussed and unkempt, clumps of hair twisted and flattened, jutting in all directions.

Bobby's image moved into the kitchen. The faucet sputtered as the man filled the kettle, and the gas popped gently as he lit the stove with a match.

While the kettle boiled, the man returned to the bathroom to wash. Some mornings he would urinate a second time. Other mornings he would fart. It was the only variation.

By the time he had shaved and combed his hair, slicking back the long strands with hair creme in a vain attempt to cover his balding crown, the kettle had boiled and begun to whistle. His step-father would then walk back to the kitchen, make himself a strong cup of instant coffee, take a brown bag lunch from the refrigerator where it had been placed the night before, and carry both lunch and coffee back to the bedroom where he would get dressed.

At times, Bobby would hear the murmur of his mother's voice as she spoke to her husband, but he could never quite make out the words. On most mornings there was only silence.

Five minutes after he had returned to the bedroom, his step-father would walk down the hallway to the door, clumping now in the heavy workboots he wore at his job in the bakery,

take his hat from the hook by the door, and leave. Bobby always listened for the soft click of the lock as it slipped into place, and the distant thump of his step-father's boots as he walked down the common stairs of the three-family triplex in which they lived, and out into the street.

Then it was silent again, and Bobby would open his eyes. Unless his mother was already awake, she would remain in bed until after he had left. Bobby loved his mother. Although she nagged and bothered him, she had never struck him or laughed at him.

For a long time while he was growing up, Bobby had not understood why his mother had married Frank Bower. His father—his real father—had died before he was five-years old, and Bobby and his mother and grandmother had lived alone for two years.

His mother found work as a seamstress in a clothing factory, and his grandmother took care of him. Bobby always remembered those days as the happiest of his life.

Then his grandmother had died and times had changed. He was seven years old and in the second grade. Now, with grandma gone, his mother had to hire a neighbour to mind him until she arrived home from work.

Bobby hated staying with Mrs. Marckwardt and her two children. Her son, Willie, was in his second grade in school, and Wendy, her daughter, was a year behind.



Willie and Wendy always teased him because he was small and wore glasses, and because he had no father. They led the others in teasing him at school, and they teased him together while he waited for his mother in their home, tormenting him if he came into their bedroom and taking their toys from him if he tried to join in their play.

"Now you two stop teasing Bobby," he remembered Mrs. Marckwardt saying again and again in her bored and tired voice. "He has problems enough without you two adding any more."

One day, after he had been there for several months, on a day when the teasing was worse than usual, and Willie Marckwardt, home from school with a cold, and bored by a day's inactivity, had begun to torment him with the single-minded purposefulness of a seven-year-old, Bobby finally reached his limit.

They were sitting at the kitchen table, and Willie had stolen the cookie Mrs. Marckwardt had given Bobby as an after-school snack. Willie had eaten his in one large bite, and then grabbed Bobby's from his hand. Mrs. Marckwardt had left the kitchen, and Wendy was laughing at Bobby's whining pleas for the return of his cookie.

Bobby remembered only that his head had begun to spin, and that a strange high-pitched wailing had launched itself inside his skull. Sliding off his own chair he had raced around the table towards Willie and pushed him backwards with all his might. With a frightened yelp Willie had tumbled over and

forcefully hit the floor. The rest was dim and hazy in Bobby's memory, but he knew he had leapt upon the fallen Willie and struck him again and again with all the strength his fury could produce in his thin, small arms.

Wendy Marckwardt ran screaming for her mother, and that was the very last time Bobby had ever stayed with them.

Three months later his mother married Frank Bower. From the very beginning Frank and Bobby didn't get along. Bobby hated this strange, silent man who touched his mother and who changed his name from Bobby Furcola to Bobby Bower.

"Wouldn't you like to be Bobby Bower now?" the man had asked one day soon after the wedding.

"No!"

"I'm your father now, and you'll have my name like it or not!"

"You're not my father! You're not! You're not!"

"You ungrateful little bastard!" the man had shouted, slapping Bobby sharply across the head so that he fell awkwardly to the floor and his glasses skittered across the kitchen to crack against the wall.

His mother had stepped in then, frightened and quivering. "Frank! For god's sake let the boy be. He'll have your name-- just give him time. He's only a baby, Frank. For the love of God, let it be!"

Bobby had taken his step-father's name, and when they moved

and he went to a new school it was easier. He had taken the name, but he had never removed the wall between them.

When his step-father beat him he would remain aloof, retreating with his wounds to some distant corner of his mind. Once when he was ten years old, the man had struck him in a fit of anger, and he had run to his mother in despair.

"Why did you do it?" he had choked through his tears while his mother held him in her arms. "Why did you marry him?"

His mother had pulled him close. "I didn't want to be alone," she had said desperately "I just didn't want to be alone."

His mother had cried with him then, each in the others arms, the tears warm and salty on his face. And in his ten-year-old way Bobby came to realize that being alone was the most terrible and most terrifying of all things.

By the time he reached Parkview High, Bobby's mood had changed. The anger and resentment his dream had induced had faded, and he reminded himself that people laughed at him because he wanted them to, because he enjoyed amusing them with his faces and his tricks. He was better than anyone else in the school at being funny, and everyone knew it.

In the Parkview basement, before the homeroom bell sounded, Bobby found John Vavaris and his friends, and joined them.

"Heeeey--good looking! How's it hanging?" Vavaris called out in greeting. As usual, the basement was crowded with students and loud music played over the P.A. system.

Someone else called out. "It's beautiful Bobby Bower. How's it going, B.B.?"

"Bobby's been working on his imitation of a movie actress," Vavaris said to the group. "Come on, Bobby, show us how it's going."

"Naw, not now," Bobby protested with a forced shyness that anticipated the insistence he knew would follow.

It did. A chorus of voices urged a quick performance. Bobby laughed and nodded. "Okay--okay! I'll do it."

"Attaboy, Bower," Vavaris chimed.

Bobby rolled back his eyes and fluttered his eyelids. He lifted his hands to shoulder height, wrists limp, and began to strut across the floor of the school basement, his hips swinging loosely, his lips smacking loudly with slow, exaggerated kisses.

The group of students who watched began to grow larger as others in the basement were attracted by the whistles and cat-calls accompanying Bobby's burlesque.

Bobby turned, spread his feet, and began to gyrate his hips. He had once managed to gain entrance to a strip club on Saint Lawrence Street, and had watched in fascination as the strippers went through their exotic routines. He had often

held the picture of their lewd gyrations in his mind, and now he worked his own crude imitation.

Some of the students began to chant. "Take it off! Take it off!" And Bobby, caught up in the rushing wave of their attention, laughed loudly and began to slowly unbutton his cotton shirt.

With the shirt finally off and tossed to the crowd, and thrown eventually to the floor because no one would hold it, Bobby began to awkwardly lift the bottom of his grey-white undershirt, revealing the pale creamy skin of his hairless chest and belly.

It was at that moment Mr. Pilano arrived. He was the teacher on morning hall duty in the basement, and the sound of the chanting had filtered through the school's antiquated ventilation system to the staffroom above and brought him running.

He pushed his way through the crowd and it fell silent. Bobby looked up at him, surprised and a little embarrassed even though he still glowed from the attention he had just received. Someone tossed him his shirt from the floor, and he clutched it in his hands.

"What's going on here, Bower?" Mr. Pilano demanded. He was a big man, fat-bellied and tall. He used his size to intimidate, standing close to his victim and glaring down from stern, dark eyes.

Other students were edging away, eager to escape any blame that might be forthcoming, but Vavaris stepped forward and intervened. "He was just showing us how it was done in the clubs, sir," Vavaris said with a smile.

"I'm not asking you, Vavaris," Pilano said sharply. "I'm asking Bower. Now just take your little crew and get to class."

"The bell hasn't rung yet, sir!" Vavaris intoned sarcastically as he swung casually on his heels and sauntered a short distance away. Pilano had once flattened a kid for swearing and had gotten away with it. The kid's father had even come to school and congratulated him for enforcing a little discipline. The Greeks were like that. They believed a heavy hand made a lasting impression--and so did Pilano. No one wanted to push him too

stood silently, his head bent low.

"Get your shirt, Bower," the teacher said caustically.

"The shirt you addressed is not one of my secret desires." He

looked at Bobby seriously. "What the hell are you doing,

do you let those guys make an ass of you? Why

use your head for something else besides holding up your ears?"

Bobby shrugged, his cheeks reddening, his eyes avoiding Pilano's infamous glare.

"Get the hell out of here, Bower," the teacher barked.

"And for your own good, don't ever let me catch you pulling

that stunt again.

Bobby spent the rest of the morning in the melancholy silence that had followed Pilano's rebuke of his behavior. At lunch, instead of going down to Nicko's restaurant with Vavaris and the others, Bobby sat alone by the window at the end of the second floor corridor.

His eyes were closed, his forehead resting on his knees, his arms wrapped tightly around his legs, and he was surprised when a girl's voice addressed him.

"Hi Bobby. You feeling okay?"

Bobby opened his eyes and found Elena Giannopoulos peering down at him. He nodded.

"You looked like you might be asleep or something. I hope I didn't disturb you."

"Naw it's okay," Bobby said. "I was just--" He stopped, unable to explain what he was doing.

"I know how it is," Elena said, taking up the slack in the conversation. "I feel that way too, sometimes."

Bobby looked at her. In the mood he was in he would not have spoken to anyone else in the school. He was sad and angry and lonely all at once, and he had shut himself off, waiting for his feelings to subside, waiting until it didn't matter what people said--what Pilano said--waiting until he could be himself again, making people laugh so they would like him.

But Elena was different. Even now he didn't mind talking to Elena. She made him feel good even when he was sad, even when he wanted to be alone. He didn't want to be alone when Elena was there. And suddenly an idea flashed into his mind. It was so sudden and so startling that he reeled under its impact, and his heart jumped its beat so quickly his chest ached with the rattle of it.

Could he do it? Had he now, at that very moment, the courage--a bravado born of need--to follow the flash of consciousness that inspired him? If he hesitated all would be lost--fading, blurring, vanishing, a falling star of the heart outracing the wish that pursued it, gone the very moment of its arrival.

"Elena, I--" Bobby's lips went dry and the words rasped in his throat. "--I thought, maybe--maybe you would--maybe you would want, sometime, to--ahh--" He stopped again, the words firing in his mind like pistons, but his mouth blocked and paralyzed, stuck in a pinched, mid-sentence circle like the mouth of a belly-up fish in a glass aquarium.

"Yes, Bobby?"

He pushed it out, the words as painful, as frightening, as victorious as any other birth. "Would you go--with me--to the movies, sometime." He slumped back, his head bumping hard against the pale green wall of the hallway.

Elena smiled gently. A small, shy smile that made her eyes



soften in the dull hallway light. "Thank you, Bobby. I-- I'm flattered that you asked. I'd like to--I really would-- but--my mother would never let me. I'd be afraid even to ask her."

The refusal, gentle but somehow final, reached Bobby's mind through the tumble of his exhausted emotions. The feeling of anger and disappointment again washed over him. It was always the same. A waste of time to ask for anything. There was only hurt in asking. It was all a waste.

"You would go with Mr. Chambers," Bobby said flatly.

"What do you mean?" Elena asked in surprise. Bobby had made a statement, not asked a question, and there was bitterness in his voice. "I just told you that my mother won't let me go out. And that means with anyone. 'Good Greek girls don't go out alone,' my mother is fond of saying."

"You'd go with Mr. Chambers," Bobby repeated, "I've seen you together. You shouldn't do that. He's a teacher and you're a student. You shouldn't do that!"

"What are you talking about, Bobby?" Elena said defensively. She wondered now just what Bobby meant, what he knew about her feelings for Stephen Chambers. "I spend time with Mr. Chambers because he's my teacher, and because we work together, that's all."

"He doesn't care if you're a student," Bobby insisted in a loud voice. "He knows you like him and he's glad you don't

go out with anyone else. He wants you for himself!" His anger had returned, directed not at Elena, but at Stephen Chambers. "He shouldn't do things like that. Teachers aren't supposed to do things like that. He's bad!"

Elena stepped back, away from Bobby's glowering face. "Don't be silly, Bobby Bower. You don't know what you're talking about." She turned and fled, her quickened footsteps echoing in the corridor.

"He's bad!" Bobby shouted after her retreating back.

Later, calmer now, but still upset, Bobby began to walk the hallway. As he walked he pounded the metal lockers with the edge of his fist. He felt that familiar bitterness which had so often brought him to the edge of tears. He wanted to be like the others. He didn't want to be alone.

Bobby left the second floor corridor, took the stairs to the first floor and walked slowly past the staffroom. Then, as he approached the intersection of the two corridors just beyond the main office, he noticed a light beneath the door of Christina Arianakis' classroom. He walked to the door and knocked loudly.

Christina Arianakis was at her desk correcting the homework assignment of her senior Greek class when a sudden pounding on the classroom door startled her. Before she could rise from her seat to answer the knock, the door was pulled open and

Bobby Bower stepped into the classroom, his face drawn and pinched.

Christina's desk was just to the left of the door, and like the door faced the row of tall, orange-draped windows at the far end of the classroom. Bobby walked by her, his head held stiffly, his eyes straight ahead. He moved to the window and stood there, looking out, his back to Christina. For a moment his shoulders heaved, as though they struggled to balance some great heavy weight, or as if he had run some great distance and finished, gasping for breath, at the window of her classroom.

Christina waited several minutes while Bobby stood with his back to her. He was quite still now, and Christina became aware of the classroom clock loudly ticking off its constant, interminable minutes. It was the only sound in the room.

At last she spoke. Her voice almost a whisper, gently cutting the silence. "Bobby? Is something wrong?"

He shook his head, slowly, without turning.

"Why don't you come and sit down?"

After a few moments Bobby slowly edged his way to a seat in front of Christina's desk. He kept his eyes averted, but in the fleeting glance they exchanged as Bobby sat down, Christina saw his pain and anger.

Life could be so hard, she thought as she looked at the boy now slumped at the scarred wooden desk. Children feel the pain of childhood and yearn to grow up and escape it. Only they can never really escape. The pain changes form, comes in new

disguises, but never really lets you go. The confusion of the young becomes the frightening certainty of the old. The cycle of life was no more than a straight line twisted and bent into a tormented circle by the pains of living.

Christina sighed. Perhaps she and Bobby were more alike than she had bothered to imagine. He was a lonely boy. All he wanted was to be liked, to be accepted by the others, to feel secure.

Were her own feelings so unlike his own? Did she want any less than a chance to free those feelings that were there ~~inside her~~; feelings that at times ached to be remembered.

She had loved once. And had been loved in return. It all seemed so long ago, now that the pain was gone and the anger forgotten, and the memories gently blurred. It had become in its way, a distant thing that might not have happened to her at all; that might have been dreamt, or might perhaps have happened to someone else. Only she knew it had happened to her. The pain had been real. And when it had at last left her, she had been, for a while, as cold and dry and empty as a winter weed.

The memories were with her now. Flooding her. Surrounding themselves with the curtain of her mind.

She had met him--it was him now, seldom Peter--in her final year of university. She had always been quiet and serious in high school, and even in college, still living at home and

finding her studies as much as she could handle, her social life had been restricted to a few girl friends and the sporadic social events of the church and the Greek community.

Then he had come along, and she had fallen in love. There had been problems with her family right from the very beginning, but despite it all the affair had somehow continued and Christina found herself spending more and more time with Peter and less time at home with her parents. Finally, he had asked her to live with him. It was better than marriage he had said, and just as meaningful. As difficult as it was--as painful as it was to Christina to hurt her parents, to shame them in the eyes of the family and the neighbours--she had followed her heart and left home.

Three days later she was back.

In the few days she had been gone, bringing only her clothes to Peter's small one-bedroom apartment, the phone had not stopped ringing. Her mother had called to say how badly her father felt, to break into tears, to wreak havoc with Christina's already injured conscience. The relatives had called to say how badly her mother felt, to urge her to return home, to promise her introductions to worthy, handsome Greek men who would cherish and marry her.

Peter had threatened to change the number, and on the second night had removed the phone from the hook. They had argued then, and angrily gone to bed without speaking.

And on the third day of her new life, her father had suffered a heart attack. Some called it coincidence. Others didn't. Peter had been out, at class, when the call came, and Christina had rushed to the hospital alone.

She had called him later that evening from the waiting room of the hospital, and tearfully explained that her mother would need her help caring for her father while he recovered, and that she would be moving back, for a while, with her parents.

He had tried to persuade her to stay with him, telling her that if she gave in now, if she surrendered herself and returned, she would never escape again. Christina's heart had been torn, but she knew she couldn't stay, that she had to go back.

When she went for her things the following day, Peter had not been at the apartment. After that she had called every day for weeks, but the phone was never answered, and they had never talked to one another again.

Since then there had been no one else--not really-- only casual dates and casual friends. It had been that way for a long while now. Lonely at times, but safe. She had her work, and she helped her mother care for her father as she had told Peter she must.

Then Nick had come. Gentle, considerate, as safe perhaps as her loneliness. And soon after Nick--Stephen Chambers. What did he want of her? What did he see in her? Why did she find him so attractive when they were so different, so unsuited

for one another....

Bobby Bower coughed and Christina became aware of him once again as he sat with his chin to his chest at the desk across from her own.

"Won't you tell me what's bothering you?" Christina said softly.

Bobby hesitated. His eyes brimmed with tears he had fought to hold back, stabbing his hand to his eyes, his body clenched and coiled like a frightened bird.

Finally he said. "Is something wrong with me?"

Christina stalled, unsure of an answer. "What do you mean, Bobby?"

"Is something wrong with me? Do I do bad things that make people hate me?"

"No one hates you, Bobby. Why would you think anyone hates you?"

"People hate me," Bobby insisted. "Sometimes they laugh at me. They act like my friends but they aren't. They just want to laugh and get me in trouble."

"People laugh because you amuse them, Bobby," Christina explained. "You have a talent for comedy and they enjoy it. It's like being a comedian on television--people are laughing with you, not at you."

"Sometimes they laugh when I'm not funny," Bobby said.

"I just go by and they begin to laugh."

Christina looked at the boy across from her. He seemed smaller than he really was, his soft fleshy body pressed down in the chair by the weight of his depression. Other students did sometimes laugh at him, and it wasn't his fault. He simply looked the part of the awkward, friendly bumpkin he so often portrayed, and the image stuck to the mind.

His wheat-colored hair was dry and tangled, cut straight across his forehead and cow-licked at the rear. His face was dotted with small spots of stubborn acne that flared like sunbursts on his flaxen skin, and a light painted touch of a mustache that had only begun to sprout, grey across his upper lip with an indelicate lack of concern for form and symmetry.

He wore thick, dark-rimmed glasses, his eyes round and bulging behind them, his shoes and hands were large and clumsy, and he walked rather like a duck, his heavy backside sliding one way and another in pursuit of his outflung feet.

Christina made another attempt to soothe his feelings.

"You know what Bobby? The same thing used to happen to me when I was your age, and I wasn't even a good comedian like you are. I was quiet and shy, and I had to wear special shoes--brown oxfords--for a problem I had with a bone in my foot, and I was very chubby--a little butterball--any, my hair used to frizz up on me when it was humid. I was just a mess.

"I remember that I never got asked on any dates, and sometimes even my girlfriends didn't want me around because



the boys used to laugh at me."

Christina's story was almost true. She had been shy in high school, and she had worn oxfords for a foot problem; and with Bobby listening it was easy to recall some of those painful moments, even if they were exaggerated.

"But--but you're beautiful," Bobby stammered, coloring a little at this confession of feeling.

"Well, thank you, Bobby. That's the nicest compliment I've had in ages," Christina said, smiling gently.

"Were you really ugly? When you were in high school, I mean?" Bobby asked, wanting to believe that someone he liked and admired, someone like Miss Arianakis, might have once been someone like himself.

"Very, very ugly," Christina insisted. "I don't even like to see photos of myself back then. They're all too frightening to look at." She was less than serious now, and her voice was almost playful. Bobby didn't seem to notice.

"I don't like pictures either," he said in earnest. He was silent for a moment, then looked at Christina. "Do you think--someday--I might change too? That I won't look funny anymore and that people will only laugh when I want them to, and that I'll have real friends?"

"I can almost guarantee it, Bobby," Christina said. "The day will come when you'll look back on all this and it will seem like a dream. You'll remember all the good times, and the

bad times will be forgotten, and someday a teenager will come up to you and ask for advice and you'll probably tell him the same thing I just told you."

"Gee! You really think so?" Bobby exclaimed. He was sitting straight in the desk now, and his face had lost its cast of despair.

"I really think so, Bobby," Christina said confidently.

Suddenly Bobby's eyes grew harder behind the convex lens of his glasses. His voice, when he spoke again, had a thin, cold edge. "Yeah, but you didn't have people bugging you, trying to keep you down," he said harshly.

"What do you mean, Bobby? Who's trying to keep you down?"

"I don't want to tell," Bobby sniffed. "Cause it's a teacher and I don't want to get in trouble."

"You don't have to tell me, Bobby, but I can promise you wouldn't get into trouble if you did," Christina said. "If a teacher is creating difficulty for a student without good reason it should be talked about. Teachers have no right to cause trouble just because they happen to be teachers."

"You promise you won't tell?"

"Not if you don't want me to."

"Well—" Bobby hesitated, but he was unable to hold back the frustration that mushroomed inside him. "There's a girl I like," he said. "She's nice. She doesn't laugh at me. I asked her if she'd go to the movies with me sometime but she said no

"because of this teacher."

"How do you know that, Bobby? Perhaps this girl had other reasons for not being able to go. Why would you blame it on a teacher."

"Because I've seen them together. He always acts real nice to her--treats her special. He doesn't want her to go out with anyone else."

"Did he tell you that, Bobby? Or is that just what you think?"

The boy shrugged. "I didn't hear him say that, but I know that's what he wants."

"Bobby, I don't really think that any teacher in Parkview would tell a student not to go out with another student because he wanted her for himself. It just doesn't seem possible that--"

Bobby interrupted, blurting out his angry suspicion. "But Mr. Chambers does want to--" he suddenly stopped, realizing he had revealed a name.

"Stephen Chambers?" Christina exclaimed. "Is he the one you're talking about, Bobby?"

The boy nodded.

"And you think Stephen Chambers is involved with a student?"

Bobby nodded a second time. "Elena Giannopoulos," he said slowly.

Christina's face locked in surprise. She was aware that teachers sometime engaged in small flirtations with some of

their older students. It had happened before--with teachers of both sexes. It was not an uncommon occurrence in any high school. But Stephen? Surely not Stephen. He had been seeing her lately. Flirting with her. He wouldn't be involved with a student at the same time. That wouldn't make sense. It just couldn't be true. Bobby's obvious jealousy was simply distorting the truth of the matter.

"Mr. Chambers and Elena?" Christina mused. "I really don't think so, Bobby. I don't want to make you feel badly, but I don't think Stephen Chambers could possibly be involved with Elena. I know Mr. Chambers very well, and I know his students mean a good deal to him; that he cares for many of them, but he has other women--women his own age--that interest him. What kind of a relationship could a teacher expect to have with a high school girl?"

"He's waiting until she graduates," Bobby stated emphatically. "That's why he won't let her go out with me." Bobby banged his hand sharply against the desk top. "You don't believe me but it's true," he exclaimed. He stood up from the desk, "He's bad--Mr. Chambers is bad, bad, bad!" Bobby banged the desk twice more with his closed fist. "He tells girls not to go out because he wants them all for himself--then he'll hurt them!"

"Bobby--control yourself!" Christina said firmly. Then, more gently. "Please--sit down, Bobby." It was frightening to see the boy like this, as though he had lost all control. "Sit

down and I'll tell you what we can do."

Bobby sat, his rapid breath flaring the wide nostrils of his broad nose; his face brightly mottled by the sudden exertion and the sudden rush of adrenalin.

"I still think you're wrong about this, Bobby," Christina said, "But I'll tell you what I'll do--just to be fair. I'll look into it for you, okay? I'll find out and I'll tell you. But you have to promise that you won't be angry anymore. Do you promise?"

"I promise," Bobby said softly, his anger faded, replaced now by a look of remorse and penitence.

"Okay," Christina said. "We'll talk some more later. Right now you'd better get ready for your next class, the bell is about to ring."

"Miss Arianakis--I'm sorry I--"

"That's alright, Bobby. Don't worry about it. I know how you feel. Just try not to let it bother you for a while, okay?" She watched the boy move to the door. He smiled a brittle smile, his mouth pinched like the mouth of a sparrow in winter, the clown in him lost in confusion and embarrassment. He closed the door quietly as he left, and for a while Christina sat without moving.

The following afternoon, a number of teachers, including Stephen Chambers, met in the gym after school for a game of

volleyball. Often at this time of the year, noticing that the weight they had lost over the summer was beginning to inch back, tightening buttons on shirts and moving belts forward a notch or two, the men on staff decided to organize a regular program of exercise to get back into shape. Accordingly the gym was reserved for staff members one day a week, generally a Friday afternoon.

The men were occasionally joined in their activities by several of the women on staff, but for the most part it was strictly a male preserve, and after the sweat and the exertion, and after a hot shower in Charlie Humchack's small gym office, the weekend athletes would adjourn to the Akropolis, a favorite neighbourhood tavern.

At the Akropolis they would drink beer, gossip and lie a little, and later, drunk and relaxed, go out for dinner at a downtown bar or restaurant decided upon only after much debate and compromise.

Generally they arrived at the Akropolis before the six o'clock rush of construction workers and neighbourhood regulars who dropped in daily after work. The teachers would push several of the small, square formica-topped tables into a long row next to the green-felt billiard table, and sit where they could watch the pool games that went on steadily throughout the evening.

Stephen Chambers was a Friday regular. He enjoyed the release of tension the Friday afternoon exercise gave him after

a long week of teaching, and he enjoyed the beer and the relaxing atmosphere the Akropolis provided afterwards.

Given a choice however, Chambers would forego the Akropolis for the company of a young woman. He found it ironic that so much of the man-talk that went on in the tavern concerned women and sex and lustful stories of conquests and love affairs, and that so many of these Friday nights ended as a drunken, almost desperate search for easy sex, leading them to dingy, overpriced strip-joints, or dimly-lit dance halls crowded with lonely strangers.

Chambers sat next to Jeff Thompson, the black reading teacher, and across from Charlie Humchack whose broad shoulders stretched the orlon material of his tight-fitting sweater.

"Where'll we eat tonight?" Thompson asked as he passed Chambers two of the glasses of cold draft beer the waiter had placed at his end of the table.

"I'm afraid I can't join you boys for our usual gourmet dinner," Chambers said, taking the beer from Thompson's hand. "But I have an engagement tonight, and I'm forced to let you guys suffer on your own."

"You mean you would give up pig's knuckles and saurkraut for a chick?" Charlie Humchack asked with mock sarcasm, "Shame on you."

"It's not the pig's knuckles little Stevie will be eating tonight," Jeff intoned lightly. "I think he's looking forward

to a little bite of the old tail."

"Ho-ho-ho. Very funny," Chambers said in the same mocking tone. "Can't you guys find anything better to do than make fun of true love?"

"True love?" Jeff chortled. "Listen to this. The man is a natural born Garden of Eden snake, and he talks about true love. The only true love he knows, is when he's holding that knob he's got dangling between his legs."

"At least there's something there to grab," Chambers replied quickly. "That's more than some guys can say. The old myth about castrated black men is no myth around here."

"Castrated, hell," Jeff responded. "Shakespeare said, 'All the world is a stage', and us black brothers got the biggest parts in the whole damn play."

"Othello--your jokes smello," Chambers rebutted with a laugh.

"So who's the poor sacrificial lamb tonight?" Humchack asked when the others at the table had finished scoffing at the familiar jests.

"I happen to have a movie date with Christina Arianakis," Chambers informed him. "As sweet a piece of pie as ever there was."

"Hey, you two are getting pretty friendly," Jeff commented. "You've been really goin' her at her lately. You getting the message she's hot to trot?"



Chambers shrugged. "Don't know," he said, "She's a hard lady to draw a bead on. Sometimes I think she'd really like to get something going, and other times she's harder to move than a blocked bowel."

"My God," Jeff snorted. "You mean a snake like you has known a woman all this time and has yet to bed her? For shame!"

"Well, I wouldn't tell low-life guys like you even if I had," Chambers announced, "but if you see a big shit-eating grin on my face Monday morning, you may be justified in your filthy suspicions."

Don Whitby, Parkview's pudgy, blond geography teacher sat to Jeff Thompson's right and had overheard the conversation. Whitby was known in the staffroom as an accomplished teller of tales, and could keep a straight and honest face even while relating obvious absurdities.

"If you lay a finger on that poor innocent child, I'll skin you alive," he said sternly, pointing a stubby finger in Chambers' direction. "As you know, I'm an expert hypnotist-- a Svengali in fact--and that sweet young thing is deeply under my spell. All I have to do is snap my fingers and she's forced to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God!"

"Well, at least there's one of us," Chambers cut in.

Whitby ignored his remark. "And because she can tell me only the truth, because she is under my deep and powerful spell--"

"Deep and powerful smell?" Jeff laughed.

"--deep and powerful spell," Whitby continued unfazed.

"I'll know every detail of your sordid attempts to corrupt this innocent child and rob her of her most precious and singular gift--her unmolested virtue."

The others at the table applauded, and Whitby raised his hands solemnly for silence. "And so--from the kindness of my heart. To prevent you from reveling in this sin--this sacrilege --I bravely volunteer myself to go in your place."

The others at the table again applauded his magnanimity.

"Hear! Hear!" Humchack called out.

"Well," Chambers said, appearing to consider the offer.

"I'm really tempted to let you save me, but my priest would have a heart attack if I went to church without something juicy to confess, and I do feel responsible for his well-being, you know."

"It's a pity you're so kind-hearted," Whitby sighed. "I would have made a great sinner tonight."

Chambers stood up from the table and lifted the remains of his beer. "Salut, bonhommes, have a good evening. I'll think of you--horny and helpless--as I settle Christina and myself in my cozy apartment." He lifted his glass in a silent toast and emptied it.

"You'd better take your phone off the hook," Jeff Thompson called after him as he headed for the door of the tavern. "We're

gonna' call every hour for progress reports!"

Chambers walked the block from the Akropolis to the Parkview parking lot and climbed into the TR-6. Christina had gone home directly after school, but had agreed to meet him at the Atwater metro station so he wouldn't have to drive all the way to pick her up.

Christina was waiting when he arrived, and they reached the theatre in plenty of time to enjoy a revival of Casablanca with Bogart and Bergman. They had both seen the film before, but it was a mutual favorite and they enjoyed it a second time.

After the movie they stopped for a snack at a small restaurant nearby, and it was there Chambers detected a sombre uneasiness in Christina's mood.

"You seem a little quiet tonight. Is something wrong?"

"No--it's nothing--I'm fine," Christina answered. "Do I seem like something is wrong?"

"You just seem very quiet. As if you have something on your mind."

"No--I'm sorry if I seem that way. Maybe I'm just tired."

They didn't talk much after that, and for a while Chambers considered taking her straight home. But the evening was still young, and the beer in the tavern had built up his hopes for a romantic interlude. He wasn't quite ready to give up. It was one thing not to tell the guys at the tavern what happened on

a date, and quite another not to have anything to tell.

"I hope you're not too tired to come back to my place for a drop of cognac?" he suggested as they left the restaurant.

"Well--okay," Christina hesitated. "But just for a little while."

When they arrived at Chambers' basement apartment in Westmount, Stephen softly tuned the stereo and poured them both a double shot of cognac. "I've put the coffee on," he said. "It's set to stay warm, so we can have a second cup later."

He sat beside her on the oversized pillows she had placed on the floor and took the glass of cognac from her hand. He wanted some idea of what was in store for the rest of the evening. He kissed her, gently at first, and then with more urgency. She didn't respond. Her eyes were closed and she placed her arms about his neck, but there was no warmth in her kiss.

Chambers slowly pulled away. He gazed at her intently and took her hand in his own, pressing it softly. "Uh-uh. No way," he said. "There's no way you can convince me nothing is wrong. You can say things with words, but kisses never lie. Why can't you tell me, Christina?"

She shrugged. "It--it's nothing really. Just a conversation I had with Bobby Bower yesterday."

"Oh?" Chambers murmured. He shook his head. Bobby was becoming more trouble than he was worth. He wished Christina didn't spend so much time listening to his adolescent heartbreak.

"Well, as I've said before, we've got to realize that we can't always take Bobby too seriously. Sometimes he gets upset and makes mountains out of molehills."

"Yes, I suppose that's what happened," Christina agreed.

"But it just sort of stuck with me--I--I don't know why."

"What did he say exactly?" Chambers asked.

Christina hesitated. "It concerned you, actually," she finally said.

"Me? Oh for Christ's sake! And what does the oracular Bobby Bower have to say about me?"

"He was upset--angry. You know Bobby. He said--he implied that you--oh damn, Stephen, I don't even want to tell you."

"Christina--tell me! Don't be silly. You can't let me go now. I'd die of curiosity."

"Well," Christina said with a sigh. "He said--I know it's crazy--but he said that you didn't want him dating Elena Giannopoulos--that you were turning her against him because you wanted her for yourself."

"What?"

"That's what he said," Christina murmured, shrugging her shoulders.

"My God, I don't believe it! You spend a little time with one of your students and the world thinks there's something going on."

"Well, it's just Bobby. No one else--"

"No-no-no-no!" Chambers interrupted. "Bobby's not the first and only. Ever since Elena and I started the school newspaper and got a little office in the bookroom upstairs, there's been a few snide comments here and there. I never took them seriously--they were just part of the normal half-assed joking that goes on around Parkview. But Bobby--what did he say? That I want Elena for myself? Christ, that's ridiculous. I like Elena--who doesn't? She's a great student, and I spend a lot of time with her on the newspaper, but really Christina, every teacher has students they like--that they grow close to during the year. But it doesn't mean it goes any further than that. I mean, how could I manage a relationship with a seventeen-year-old girl--a sheltered seventeen-year-old at that? Bobby is really off the track this time."

Christina shrugged again. "That's what I thought. It just worried me a little because I was seeing it from Elena's viewpoint--that if something did develop between you, she wouldn't be ready to handle it. I mean--you yourself are concerned about relating to a seventeen-year-old. Imagine how she would feel trying to relate not only to an older man, but to a teacher."

"Exactly what I mean," Stephen nodded. "It would just be too complicated."

"And that's not the even the worst of it," Christina added.  
2 "I mean--I know. I really know. Elena and I are both Greek. In fact she sometimes reminds me a bit of myself at that age.

Oh, I wasn't as bright as she is, and probably not as mature, but I had the same kind of life, the same kind of family upbringing. We both suffer from something I call the Greek dilemma.

Chambers looked at her questioningly.

"It's my own term," she explained, "developed from a common problem for many young Greeks--especially girls. You see, once Greek children begin to grow up and realize that the world they live in is not the same one their parents live in, they often don't know where to turn or what to believe in. It's the conflict--the clash between the old and the new--that causes the confusion--the dilemma of what to do and which way to live.

"Elena would have a hard time dealing with any relationships that didn't conform to her parents' expectations--that didn't, in fact, originate with them in terms of an introduction or an approved suitor. The Greeks are very concerned with the honor of the family name--it can almost become as important as life itself--and any girl who becomes involved with a stranger, who somehow becomes involved in an unapproved relationship, is shaming the family."

"Does that include you, as well?" Stephen asked.

"In a way--yes," Christina nodded. "I'm older now, so it's not as bad. But I'm still expected to live at home, and because I'm unmarried I'm still expected to live by the old rules and customs. You just can't imagine what it's like, unless, like Elena, you have to live through it."

Christina stopped. She grew reflective. Staring through and beyond the walls of Chambers apartment.

Stephen spoke. "Is this, my dear Demosthenes, your kind and subtle way of telling me we can't have a relationship?" he asked quietly, affected now by the sudden look of sadness that had touched Christina's face.

"What?" Christina asked softly, becoming suddenly aware that Stephen had asked a question, and that the words, held on the edge of consciousness as she slipped back from the distance of her thoughts, were slowly taking shape in her mind. "Oh, Stephen. No--no! I didn't mean that. She moved closer and leaned her head against his shoulder. "I like you. I really do. It's just that sometimes I feel I have so much to think about, so much to consider. Sometimes I feel very confused."

Chambers put his arm around her, welcoming closeness.

Christina continued. "I like you Stephen Chambers. Even though I know it's not good for either of us, That we should both know it's a foolish match with nowhere to go. We're two very different kinds of people, and I think we're too old to change very much." She lifted her head and looked at him. A tear touched the corner of her eye. Chambers didn't speak. He took her face between his hands and kissed her. This time her lips were warm and waiting....

The following week, John Vavaris was sitting at the counter



in Nicko's Grill watching two grade nine students play pool on the green-felt table. It was the end of the fifth period at Parkview, and Vavaris realized that the school was about to have lunch. He had skipped two of his morning classes, but now he would go over to the school cafeteria and have lunch with Karen Hudak.

As he got up to leave, a friend, Steve Kalanganis, was coming through the door.

"Hey man, you're in trouble," Kalanganis told him, a wide grin spreading on his face.

"What's up?" Vavaris asked.

"It's Kellner," the other boy said. "I think she freaked out because you weren't in class today. She said she knew you were in school, and that you had a hell of a nerve skipping her class when she was the only teacher in the whole place who was on your side. Boy, was she mad! She said that if anybody saw you, to tell you she wanted to see you after school or she was going to the principal."

"Ahhh, the bitch, she's enough to drive you nuts," Vavaris complained. "One minute she tells you she's on your side-- that she's not like other teachers--and the next minute she's threatening to run to the principal with your balls in her hand. Sometimes I'd just like to smash her."

"I still think you'd better go see her," Kalanganis advised. "She sounded pretty serious."

Vavaris took his advice. When the final bell rang he went to see Reena Kellner. She was sitting at her desk in the empty classroom, staring at the wall.

Vavaris stood in the doorway for a moment before she saw him. Despite his feeling of annoyance he could not help but admire her attractiveness. Long blond hair fell down across her shoulders, and her face, although pale, was well-shaped. Despite being thin, her small, rounded breasts pushed tightly against her clinging sweater, and her legs, wrapped in a short skirt, were long and firm.

He cleared his throat and Reena's head turned slightly to meet his gaze. Her face, so still and calm a moment ago, was now alive with anger, the pale skin flushed, her full mouth stretched into a sneer.

"Where have you been, you--you--" Reena spit out. "You've missed two of my classes this week, and today I get a note from your math teacher asking me not to excuse you from his class any more because you're missing too much work. What he doesn't seem to know is that I've never excused you from his class--never excused you from any class--and I want to know just what the hell you think you're doing."

Vavaris broke his gaze from her punishing eyes and slumped into a seat near the door.

"C'mon--answer me, big man," Reena shouted. "Don't I get any answers? Are you too dumb to even answer my questions?"

I'm the only teacher in this goddamn school who's nice to punks like you, and what do I get in return? A lot of shit, that's what!

"What did you do, Vavaris? Write a note excusing you from classes and sign my name to it? Is that your game? Figuring that if I found out I'd understand--wouldn't cause any trouble. Well you were wrong, Vavaris, 'cause you made one mistake too many. You started including my class with those you didn't go to. My class, Vavaris! And how do you think that makes me feel? I think I'm your friend--I'm nice to you--and what do you do? You bugger off just as if it was any other dumb class you didn't like. Just what the hell is wrong with you."

"I'm sorry," Vavaris said in a low voice.

"What did you say?" Reena snapped accusingly.

"I said I was sorry," Vavaris repeated in a louder voice.

"Well it's not enough. Being sorry is not enough. You've made a fool of me and taken advantage of me, and being sorry isn't enough!"

Vavaris looked up at her, his own anger growing under her attack. "So what the hell do you want me to do--crawl over and kiss your ass?"

"You little bastard!" Reena exclaimed. "Do you think you're funny? All I have to do is walk down to the office and you're out on your ear. And you wouldn't get back in. You'll be out on the street where you belong."

Vavaris jumped to his feet, his temper flaring. "Go ahead and do it. Go ahead and get me kicked out. I don't give a shit. I'm not kissing anybody's ass just to stay in school. I don't give a fuck about school!" He turned away from her and began to walk out the door.

"John, wait!" Reena suddenly called after him.

Vavaris stopped at the door but kept his back to her.

"John--I--I'm sorry. I didn't mean what I said. I--I don't want to get you into trouble. I lost my head because I was hurt that you didn't want to come to my class anymore. Please come back in, John. Let's talk about it." Reena's voice was calm now, filled with concern and repentance. Vavaris was startled by the change. He turned and looked at her. She reached out her hand to him and he moved back into the room.

"I'm sorry too, Miss Kellner," the boy said. "I didn't mean to yell like that."

"It was my fault, John--not yours. You have nothing to be sorry for, and I'd like the chance to make it up to you." She paused, looked at the boy apologetically, then went on. "Remember when I asked you if you would consider helping me move my furniture? Well, if you could consider doing it today I'll be glad to buy you dinner, and maybe it'll give us a chance to talk this out. What do you say?"

Vavaris was startled. He had just been invited to dinner. One minute he was going to be kicked out of school, and the next

he had been invited home. It was almost too good to be true. You could never tell what Kellner would do next, but anything was better than another trip to the principal's office. "Yeah," he said aloud. "Yeah, that sounds really good."

At Reena's they had drinks while Vavaris admired the decor. "Wow! This is quite a pad," he said, his eyes drifting around the sunken living room.

"You like it?" Reena asked. "It's not much, but it's comfortable."

"A dog barked suddenly from the bedroom. "My dog," Reena explained. "I'd better let him out for a while."

The big Labrador mutt bound into the living room and jumped on Vavaris, lapping at his face with a wet tongue.

"Hey! Easy fella," Vavaris said, pushing the dog away. "I hope he's been fed lately, I think he could make a meal out of me."

"Buster, you get down!" Reena shouted. "Go and lie down, you bad dog. Go on, lie down!" The big dog whined sharply and reluctantly lay down on the rug behind the leather recliner.

"Can I fix you a drink, John?" Reena asked, taking his glass to the bar in the wall-unit. "Another scotch?"

They sat on the leather couch. Close, almost touching. Reena, fueled by the alcohol, stared at him openly. "You're a good-looking boy, John, do you know that?"

"Yeah, I don't mind agreeing with that."

"I bet you don't have much trouble with the girls."

"They're not so tough. Girls are girls, you know what I mean?"

"I suppose. But of course there is a difference between a girl and a woman. I guess you realize that, don't you?"

"I've known a few women. Older than me, you know what I mean?" Vavaris said confidently. "I like them because they know what they're doing. They're not so hung up on everything."

"Do you consider me an older woman?" Reena asked.

"Well, you're not old--but you're older than me."

"And do you think I know what I'm doing?"

"Yeah--yeah. You're really together, you know what I mean?"

"What am I doing, John?" Reena said, reaching out to touch the button of his tight-fitting rayon shirt.

Vavaris looked at her. She was smiling. It was a thin smile, lodged on one side of her mouth. "Gee! I don't know," he said, suddenly feeling foolish.

"Oh, I think you do," Reena said, unbuttoning his shirt and sliding her hand across his warm chest. "I think you do."

Vavaris stared at her for a moment longer and then reached out. Reena flung her arms around him. "I want you," she moaned as she roughly bit his neck.

Vavaris kissed her and felt her hands caress his body. Her lips stayed pressed against his own, and her tongue darted

frenziedly into his mouth. She began to undress him, her hands cool against his hot skin. He lay back, feeling almost helpless as Reena touched and guided him, never ceasing her caresses, never removing her lips from his body. They slid, naked, from the couch to the floor, and Vavaris felt the light tickle of her hair as her lips crept down his body, leaving a moist, cool trail across his skin. She took him in her mouth, swallowed and devoured him, and he buried his fingers in the sleek blond strands of her hair. His body tensed with sensation. Now he knew only one thing, only felt one emotion, and it centered where the soft, warm lips embraced him.

"You're so big," Reena whispered. "So hard and so big!"

He had no voice to answer, and he lay there with his eyes closed. He felt her move, slide upward until her breasts pressed against his chest, and her firm thighs touched his own. Now the soft lips were on his face, kissing, licking.

He heard a dog whine and it puzzled him. Why should a dog be whining? A hand held him, took his glistening manhood and guided him to a waiting entrance. He felt a weight descend upon him, and he felt himself sliding and sinking into a clinging, tender depth. He moaned, but the sound was trapped in his throat. She was above him now, riding with abandon, her quickening breath timed to the thrust of her hips.

Again he heard the whine. Why was she whining? He opened his eyes. It wasn't Reena. The sound came from somewhere else--

somewhere behind her. It was louder now, louder than Reena's moans and ragged breathing. Then he saw the brown and white coat behind her, the long fur, the flicking tail poised between his outstretched legs. It was her dog, sniffing and whining at their bodies as they made love. He felt a rough, hot tongue lap at his testicles. "Jesus! the dog," he groaned. "The goddamn dog!" But it was too late to stop. His mind and his groin were moving together towards a blinding rhythm of release. And Reena, too, began to gasp as she felt the rushing waves of pleasure that mounted within her. They climaxed together, almost as one, and the dog, still licking at their thrashing bodies, excited by the new smells and the strange sounds, barked loudly at their groaning.

Snow fell for the first time in early December. Melted, then fell again. By the Wednesday before Christmas, the day of the staff Christmas party at Parkview High, several inches lay on the ground, and the roads were slick and icy.

The last day of school before the holiday was not a day of school at all. Instead of morning classes there was a toboggan party on the slopes of the Mountain, followed by lunch of sandwiches and hot chocolate in the cafeteria, and a sock hop in the school gym.

By 3:30 the school was empty of students, and the staff party had begun. The staff celebrations at Parkview had a



reputation for fun. It was here, at the school parties, that teachers had a chance to forget their differences of opinion, their petty rivalries, and their inhibitions. There was plenty of food and drink and music. At the Christmas party, Santa would always put in an appearance, his scruffy white beard taped to a sweating face, a bag of small gifts slung over his shoulder. And the amusement committee, not to be outdone, generally planned a ribald entertainment for the enjoyment of all.

Pat Ender, with the help of a few of her art students, had decorated the staffroom with flowing streamers and paper wreaths, and the school stereo system had been set up on a table in one corner of the room, next to the small artificial Christmas tree covered with tiny bulbs and silver icicles.

There was beer, and a plentiful wine punch--sangria--made with fruit juices, sugar, and gallons of dark, red wine. There was even a bottle of whisky someone had spiritedly brought in from the trunk of their car. People began to laugh and sing, reading the words of their favorite carols from sheets brought in by the music department. The holiday had begun.

Stephen Chambers and Christina Arianakis sat together on one side of the room. They had not joined in the boisterous caroling, and Stephen strained to hear Christina's quiet voice beneath the clamor of the singing.

"He came in last night--flew in from Vancouver for Christmas," she said, trying to speak up. "It was unexpected. He didn't

think he would make it until New Years, but a conference was cancelled and he got a few extra days off."

"And so you have to go," Chambers said morosely.

"Yes, I'm sorry. My parents have invited him to dinner."

"So--they invited him. Why do you have to go?" Chambers argued.

"Stephen--please. It's hard enough as it is. I've explained to you that Nick and I saw a lot of one another over the summer --that he wants to marry me. I have to see him."

"You don't have to see him tonight," Chambers countered.

"Yes I do--you know I do. I'm sorry Stephen."

Chambers tried a small smile. "I'm the one who should apologize, Christina. I really do understand. I'm just acting foolish because I'm dumb and jealous and immature."

"Oh, I knew that long ago," Christina smiled. "But I like you anyway."

"You're an angel of mercy."

"I'll see you after the holiday." Christina said, rising from her seat. "Have a nice time with your family in Toronto."

"I'll do my best," Chambers said, as he stood up beside her. "Have a good holiday and take care of yourself."

They kissed gently to the whistles of the others in the room who had observed the exchange, and Christina waved as she went out the door.

Chambers sat down in his seat. When he looked up again,

Jeff Thompson was standing beside his chair. "Looks like you won't be taking Christmas home tonight, my man."

Chambers shrugged. "You win some--you lose some."

"Don't let it get you down," Thompson remarked. "The night is young, the women are wild."

"Damn right!" Chambers exclaimed, slapping the arm of the chair with an open palm. "C'mon brother, I'll buy you a drink."

The party went on for hours, and one by one people slipped away until only a dozen or so hard-core party people remained. Those who had stayed behind were largely young and single, but there was a sprinkling of married men as well.

"Hey! Hey!" Jeff Thompson called out. "The riff-raff have dearly departed for the arms of their loved ones and the comforts of the home fires, but we remain--undaunted by time or circumstance--concerned only with the fact that the booze is running low--bravely conquering the long hours of the night with the sword of music and the shield of dance. C'mon now--no slacking off when dawn is still a distant glory--let's boogie!"

The music was turned up and everyone danced until the record stopped and they could fall, exhausted, into their seats.

"Hey," Pat Ender called out. "How's about a little quiet stuff while we catch our breath." She took her half-empty glass and sat down beside Stephen Chambers, whose spirits, along with his intoxication, had risen considerably since Christina had

left hours earlier.

"This has been some party," Pat said, wiping perspiration from her forehead with a damp napkin.

"Not bad at all," Chambers remarked. "Everybody is having a real good time."

Jeff Thompson wandered over to join them, followed by Reena Kellner and several others. "Aha! The discussion corner," Jeff commented. "A gathering of sober intellectuals--teachers--sowers of knowledge in the fields of young and fertile minds."

"Teachers--yes," Chambers responded. "Fertile--hopefully. But sober? Never, my man, never!"

"You got to get it up to be fertile," Reena said caustically. "Is that why Arianakis left you behind tonight, Stevie?"

"Oh Reena, let's not start anything tonight, okay?" Pat Ender counseled gently, getting the drift of Reena's intention and trying to head off an argument.

Reena had been drinking steadily since the party began. She had dipped heavily into the sangria punch, and then, when it had arrived, moved on to the bottle of scotch. At first she had sat quietly, almost morosely, in one corner of the room. It was unlike her, but no one complained.

"The princess is quiet for once," Jeff Thompson had remarked earlier, nodding his head in Reena's direction. She must be planning something. Reena wouldn't pass up a chance for a little attention unless she was up to something. And whatever it is

Lord, please don't let it happen to me."

Jeff had felt psychic when Reena began to emerge from her shell. She was very drunk. The bottle of scotch resting by the leg of her chair was all but empty. When she joined the others on the make-shift dance floor she did so with abandon.

Reena didn't need a partner. She whirled and strutted, her hands flung wildly above her head, or caressing the outline of her own body. The others watched and smiled, and then, led by a cheering Jeff Thompson, who winked in delight to those who caught his eye, they slowly formed a circle around her and began a rhythmic clapping to her uninhibited dance.

Reena noticed the attention and began to laugh. A low, sensuous laughter that growled in her throat. The rhythm of her movements slowed, and centered in her mid-section. She lifted her sweater and held it just below her breasts, exposing her taut stomach and the patch of white skin revealed by her low-cut denim jeans.

"Anyone who can kiss this bellybutton on the move wins a free night on the town," Reena offered as she curved and gyrated. There were no takers, although Jeff Thompson dropped to his knees and begged like a dog, his tongue lolling out, while Reena and the others laughed.

It was soon after this frenetic affair that the music was lowered, and the dancers, fatigued, sank into their chairs.

Reena's blond hair hung straight and limp across her shoulders,

wet with perspiration, and her clothes, damp and wrinkled, clung tightly to her body.

Now she stood with her hands on her hips, her feet planted firmly for balance. "What business is it of yours what I start?" she said angrily to Pat Ender who had tried to divert her caustic remarks from developing into an argument. "I was talkin' to charmin' Chambers, nobody else—and it's nobody's bloody business."

"Why don't we dance again," Chambers said, ignoring her.

"Wassa matter, big boy? Don't you wanna tell us about little miss tightpants? How you haven't scored yet?"

"Listen Reena--why don't you just go and sleep it off somewhere," Chambers said sharply.

"Sleep your fuckin' self off," Reena said loudly, "And don't think I'm drunk, 'cause I'm not. Some call a spade a spade--but I call an asshole an asshole!"

"If the finger fits--wear it," Jeff Thompson commented softly.

"Screw you, you black shit!" Reena spat out angrily.

Pat Ender stood up quickly and put her arm around Reena's shoulder. "Let's get some air," she suggested, drawing Reena towards the door of the staffroom.

Reena swung away from her and stumbled. Pat pulled roughly at her arm to keep her from falling.

"Get your fuckin' hands off me, you bitch!" Reena yelled

in a rage. "I know whose side you're on. You can't get rid of me that easy." She swung her hand and hit Pat hard across the face.

For a brief instant the room was silent, the harsh sound of the slap lingering like an echo in an empty house. Then, before a single breath had been exhaled, Pat struck back, catching Reena across the mouth with the back of her hand. Reena shrieked as she tumbled backwards, landing heavily against the floor. She clutched at her mouth, saw the blood on her hand and began to cry hysterically.

"Two other women who had witnessed the exchange of blows stood up and tentatively approached her.

"She's all right," Chambers told them. "Just take her to the can and settle her down."

Pat stood with her hands covering her face. Jeff Thompson put his arm around her.

"I'm sorry," she said. "When she hit me I was so stunned I didn't think--I just lost my head."

"She deserved it," Jeff said with resentment. "If she had hit me, I'd have broken her jaw--woman or no woman."

"It's really too bad," Chambers said as he joined them.

"What's that?" Jeff asked.

"I was thinking that it really is too bad Reena was born a woman," Chambers said.

"That's no woman, that's the Countess Frankenstein," Jeff

scowled.

"Maybe," Chambers conceded. "But if she had been born a man she could get away with her screwed up life a little more easily. She could drink and curse and whore all she wanted, and people might avoid her, like they would anybody else, they didn't want to associate with, but I don't think she would suffer quite as much. I mean--a man with that kind of mentality would have a problem keeping friends, but people are really knocked out--I mean, they can actually begin to hate Reena when they discover the neurotic mind behind that sexy body of hers."

"Because she's a woman," Pat interjected. "And women aren't supposed to look one way and act another?"

"Something like that," Chambers said. "Because she's a woman, no one really seems to know how to handle it."

"I know how to handle it," Jeff said. "Throw her off a goddamn bridge."

"I'm just sorry for her," Pat said. "She's a sad person."

"Well, you'd better not be too sorry for her," Jeff responded. "'Cause after that smack you gave her, I'm willing to bet shit to doughnuts that you're not her favorite person anymore, and if I know Reena like I know Reena, she's not going to forget this little scene for a long time to come."

Pat sighed. "Yes, I think I know what you mean," she said.

"I guess the party's over," Chambers said as the remainder of the staff began to drift out the door of the staffroom.



"Merry Christmas," he said ironically.

"God bless us--every one." Jeff Thompson added quietly.

Chapter six:

Robert Petersen woke with a start and sat up quickly on the edge of the quilt-covered bed. Beside him his wife turned sleepily on her side, reached out, her fingers touching his back, and murmured, "It's okay sweetheart--you're on vacation, remember?"

Petersen sank back against the pillow, feeling the tension that had accompanied his waking slowly ease away. He drifted easily into the mellow state between sleep and wakefulness. The school was closed and he could stay in bed. Lying there it was funny to realize that as alive and energized as Parkview had been yesterday afternoon, it was now dark and quiet. And it would remain dark and quiet for ten long days.

Parkview really was a world in itself; a separate, vibrant insular world, like a starship whirling through space. Yesterday they had all been at their posts, and the ship had hummed with life and activity. And today--today it was as if they had all been placed in suspended animation while the ship time-warped through the next ten days. All this--the holidays--Christmas--could be just a dream that some ironic computer had programmed into the sleep of suspension. They could all be simply dreaming, cut off from the problems and the work and the emotions of the ship. But if it was a dream, the dream would end. Parkview was still there--waiting--patient and enduring--waiting for the

dream to end and the time to come when it would reclaim them all.

Stephen Chambers packed the back seat of the Triumph for his semi-annual pilgrimage along the Trans-Canada highway to Toronto. His sister had a house there, and twice a year, Christmas and Labor Day, the Chambers clan gathered for a family reunion.

Chambers was glad to get away. He needed a diversion. The two weeks before Christmas were difficult times in any school. The kids, active at any time, were more rambunctious than ever, and it was a constant battle to get anything done at all. Now he had ten peaceful days to recuperate, to be unconcerned with lesson plans and homework assignments, students and paperwork. It would give him a chance to think. To see how he felt about things. He had been uneasy since the first night he and Christina had slept together at his apartment. He couldn't quite shake the feeling that Christina was holding back, that she was uncomfortable with their physical involvement and that although her body enjoyed it, her mind wouldn't set her free.

Stephen now felt that it had a lot to do with Nick Galanos, the man Christina was spending Christmas with. Galanos had asked her to marry him. They were probably lovers and Christina might be finding it hard to be involved with two men at the same

time.

He wasn't sure how he felt about it himself. Not sure at all. Did he, like Galanos, want to marry Christina? If he did, why had he felt so strange when Bobby Bower claimed he wanted Elena Giannopoulos for himself? Why hadn't he just laughed it off? No, he wasn't sure at all. He needed time to think. The holiday would be good for him. Maybe it would straighten out his head.

For Elena Giannopoulos, Christmas meant long and boring days at home. There were the usual family visits, and a party at her aunt's to celebrate the New Year, but the days were very much the same; endless cycles of schoolwork--reviewing for the exams that followed the holidays--housework, babysitting her younger brother and writing editorials for the school newspaper. She and Stephen Chambers had called the paper The Viewpoint, and a dozen other students now worked with them as printers and reporters.

It was thoughts of Stephen Chambers that made the holiday bearable for Elena. Editing the newspaper after school had given her the chance to be around him, to work with him and talk to him. She had grown far less shy in his company, and the infatuation she had felt--an infatuation that had bothered and confused her because it had interfered with her schoolwork and her whole life--the infatuation had altered, had evolved into

a peaceful calmness she had not felt in a long time. She could imagine now, that someday she would be able to express her feelings. She could believe that someday they might be friends. And with that, for now, she could be content.

At 8:30 a.m., the day before Christmas, Bobby Bower caught the southbound Park Avenue bus and rode it to the Handyman hardware store on Saint Antoine Street. The previous evening he had seen a newspaper advertisement requesting part-time help.

Dressed in clean, pressed clothes, and with his stiff, unruly hair brushed and oiled as smooth as yellow glass, Bobby presented himself to a harried manager, and after a brief interview concerned mostly with Bobby's ability to converse in French as well as English, and a short discussion about his availability, Bobby was hired and told to report for work the day after Christmas. The week following the holiday was a big sale period at Handyman's and the store would be busy. Bobby was assigned to the sporting goods department.

The prospect made Bobby beam with anticipation. At first he had worried that the job would rob him of all his time--time he had put to good use--but the concern was outweighed by the fact that working meant having money in his pocket--no more begging for a handout or an allowance that was slow in coming--no more stealing quarters from his mother's purse. He would be out of the house for most of the holiday, far away from his step-father, and

later, when school opened again, he would be able to work Thursday nights and weekends.

But the thing that Bobby discovered he liked best of all was the fact that he worked in the sports department. There, among the hunting and ski equipment, the winter fishing gear and snowmobile accessories, he found himself strangely content. When he was not serving customers he would busy himself with straightening the shelves, cleaning display cases, or even sweeping the floor. The men who worked with him shook their heads lightly in disbelief. Such youthful enthusiasm was a rare and fleeting sight. For Bobby, the job at Handyman's was the best holiday he had ever had.

Karen Hudak wanted the holiday as a chance to relax and escape the routine of school, but it was not to be. After Christmas she began to slip out of the house on the pretext of visiting her friends, and met with John Vavaris at his Park Avenue apartment. The guilt was still there, but so was a growing need, and she had learned to live with both.

John Vavaris enjoyed the holiday. Twice, early in the week, he had met Karen Hudak at the apartment and they had made love. Later, in the evenings, he would meet his friends at the poplroom, or the rink in Fletcher's Field for a game of hockey. After the game they would head for a brassiere or a downtown disco where they would drink beer and try to pick up girls. To Vavaris, the

holiday life was much better than books and homework and getting up every morning to go to school.

When Karen's mother fell ill and went into the hospital, Karen suddenly had no time to see him. At first he had been annoyed and angry, telling her that it made no difference to her mother's recovery whether she spent the day in the hospital or at the apartment with him. But Karen had seemed determined not to listen and to spend her time at her mother's bedside, so Vavaris simply shrugged his shoulders and went about the business of enjoying his vacation. He was pleased, but not surprised, when Reena Kellner returned from her holiday trip and called him.

Reena Kellner eventually recovered from both the hangover and the humiliation she felt she had suffered as a result of the staff Christmas party, and the day after Christmas flew south to Curacao, a small island off the coast of Venezuela. In Curacao she acquired a new tan, a string bikini, two new lovers and another blinding hangover, all of which made her consider the trip worth every penny of the price.

While she lay in the sun and sand of Curacao, Reena occasionally thought of John Vavaris. She came to the conclusion that her affair with him was entirely justified in the sense that it was of benefit to both of them, harmed no one, strengthened the cause of student-teacher relationships, and was, after all, very, very stimulating. Young men were always so ready, so virile,

she thought. It was a shame that males reached their sexual peak at such a tender age--unless of course one was into screwing young men. Then it was just fine. Just fine, indeed.

When she returned to the city the day after New Year, Reena called Vavaris at home on the pretext that he had some work he was supposed to have done for her over the holiday. She and Vavaris spent the night together and saw the sun rise the following morning. Reena was pleased by his eagerness--an eagerness that matched her own.

Pat Ender spent the holidays skiing with friends in the Laurentian mountains to the north of the city. She had called Karen Hudak on Christmas day, but there had been no answer. She had called again on New Year's Eve, but again there had been no response. When she had called a third time the afternoon of New Year's Day, the phone had been answered by Karen's aunt who has stopped by the house. When Pat identified herself, the aunt had been kind enough to explain that Mrs. Hudak had been hospitalized, and that although she was recovering slowly, she would have to remain in the hospital for a while longer, and that Karen would meanwhile live away from home.

The following day, the day before school opened, Pat dropped by the hospital, talked with Karen, and met Mrs. Hudak, a thin, grey woman with a sad face and trembling hands. Pat noticed that Karen had lost weight, and that dark shadows circled her eyes.



Christmas had come and gone, but there had not been much for Karen to celebrate.

Christina Arianakis and her family played Christmas host to Nick Galanos. Nick's mother and brother lived in Montreal, and although Nick spent afternoons in their company, most of his time was spent with Christina and her family.

On New Year's Eve, George Arianakis, Christina's father, invited the Galanos family to dinner. More than once, Christina observed, the two families exchanged their views on engagements and weddings.

With a small touch of regret, Christina slowly discovered a lack of excitement in her relationship with Nick Galanos. He was an honest, straightforward, hardworking man who took his responsibilities seriously, and planned carefully for the future. And it was his very conscientiousness, his caution, that deprived him of a sense of daring and spontaneity that Christina had hoped she would somehow find in him despite his careful habits.

And yet, as quiet and restrained as Nick was, Christina had also found a certain sense of comfort and pleasure in his open affection for her. She felt, in his presence, the warm security of a woman who is loved without question and without hesitation. She felt needed and desired, and her heart, in its way, responded to that love.

As the holiday came to an end and Nick prepared to return

to Vancouver, he again asked Christina to marry him, and this time produced a small diamond engagement ring. Christina had cried then, and Galanos, misinterpreting her tears, and blinded perhaps by his own desires, had taken her sudden emotion as a sign of acceptance and begun to talk excitedly of churches and wedding dates.

It was with a small despair that Christina had wrapped her arms around him and tearfully explained that although she hated herself for what she was, she could still not agree to marry him--that she still needed time to think and to examine her own life.

Galanos, hurt by the disappointment of her second postponement, asked her if there was someone else, and because she was, at the time, confused and vulnerable, she had said that yes, perhaps there was, that she wasn't sure, and that she had to find out before she could commit her life to anything.

And although Nick had bravely told her that he would wait --that he only wanted her to accept him if she was sure and certain, their parting at the airport the following morning was a strained and distant affair, and Christina knew, without words, that she had come as close as she ever would to losing someone she cared for.

## Chapter seven:

Karen Hudak walked through the blowing snow towards the bus stop at Sherbrooke and Saint Lawrence Street. She could not force back the tears, and the cold wind burned against her reddened cheeks. In her hand she still held the small piece of paper given to her at the drugstore. It was the result of the urine test she had submitted two days earlier. The results were positive. She was pregnant.

For the first time in her young life, Karen felt totally alone. There had been bad times before; trying, painful periods that had demoralized and depressed her, but never before had life felt so hopeless, and the thought of oblivion so strong and comforting.

What else could possibly go wrong? she wondered. What else could life do to hurt her? Her mother, home again, was still weak and unable to manage for herself, balancing on that thin, fine point between recovery and relapse. Karen knew that her mother's health should be her major concern, but she also knew that it wasn't. She knew that she wanted only to crawl away, to hide in some dark dim corner where the hurt couldn't reach her.

"Oh Johnny, why?" she murmured aloud. "Why has this thing happened to us?"

Ever since vacation had ended and school begun again, Karen had noticed a subtle, evolving change in John Vavaris. It was

harder to talk to him. He was always "busy" and spent less time with her. He had even become less interested in her body, and the last time they had dated he had taken her to an early movie and then straight home. "It's better not to upset your mother when she's so sick," he had said. But Karen wondered. It wasn't like Johnny to worry about her mother. And she had heard rumors about Johnny and Miss Kellner--but she didn't want to believe them. Then, two days ago, she had seen them together.

That day, during lunch, she had told Vavaris that she wanted to see him after school, that they had something urgent and important to talk over. She had wanted to tell him that she was frightened, that her period was three weeks overdue, and that she wanted to have a pregnancy test. She wanted to take her urine sample to a drugstore on Sherbrooke Street that promised results in forty-eight hours, and she wanted him to go with her.

Vavaris met her after school, but he was rushed and angry. Before she had a chance to explain he was making excuses, working on a quick escape.

"I told you at lunch I wouldn't have time to see you today," he said sharply. "Things come up, and sometimes they're urgent, and you just can't go around screwing up your plans because someone wants to talk to you. No way! That's not how it works in my life, baby. It can't be so damn important we can't wait another day to straighten it out. Why can't you just tell me what it is right here?"

Karen shook her head. "It's something we have to talk about," she said urgently, "not a news bulletin I'm passing on as you run @own the hall."

They had quarreled briefly, and Vavaris had refused to listen, leaving with a vague promise that they would talk as soon as it could be arranged. Karen had then gone to the drugstore alone. She couldn't delay any longer. She had to know, despite her fear, whether she carried a life inside her.

It was then, as she left the drugstore, after submitting her urine sample for the pregnancy test, that Karen achingly discovered the fears she had been denying were real, that the rumors circulating through the school were all too true. She saw them both, in a car, as it sped along Sherbrooke Street. Reena Kellner and Johnny. Her Johnny, who had left her for some urgent and important business! She saw them together and they were laughing!

When she saw Vavaris again, she had been as cold as ice. Her anger and despair had mingled and frozen, held in abeyance until the time was right. Vavaris had approached her at lunch and she had coldly told him she would see him at the apartment that evening. At first he had refused, complaining that he had a hockey practice he couldn't afford to miss. But Karen had insisted and something in her voice and in her face must have surprised him because he gave in and agreed to meet her.

She had gone home after school, and after explaining to

her mother that she was going to a friend's to work on some homework, had returned to the drugstore for the results of her test.

And now, small tears icing her cheeks, she waited for the bus that would take her to the Park Avenue apartment Vavaris shared with the others. Cold, icy snow wrapped itself around her legs. The chill wind had strengthened from moment to moment and had begun to pile long drifts against parked cars and buildings. The first real storm of the winter had arrived.

What would John do when she told him? Karen asked herself, the fear and sense of loneliness banishing the anger that had carried her through the last two days. And what would her mother do when she found out?

The thoughts swirled through Karen's mind. Why had it happened? Why couldn't it be a dream? Why couldn't she crawl away and hide until the nightmare was over.

She got off the bus at the stop above Mont-Royal Avenue and furtively made her way to the apartment. She knocked gently and stepped back quickly in surprise when the door was pulled open by Peter Malinakis.

In her moment of surprise Karen recalled her initial meeting with Malinakis in Dusty's restaurant, the day she had first gone there with Vavaris the previous spring. She remembered how suggestive he had seemed, and how she had disliked his oily face and close-cropped scalp. She had gotten to know him since then,

he was still a friend of Johnny's, but her first impression hadn't changed. It had, if anything, intensified.

"Is Johnny here?" she asked, somewhat embarrassed to have Malinakis find her knocking at the door.

The boy smiled, a small condescending smile that barely stretched his wide mouth. "No, he ain't here."

Karen glanced over his shoulder into the apartment. "I was supposed to meet him. Do you know when he'll be here?"

"Maybe" Malinakis said slowly, his voice teasing, the grin widening on his face. "Why don't you come in and I'll warm you up."

"Did Johnny say why he was going to be late?" Karen asked anxiously.

"Naw. But don't worry. What's the rush?"

"My mother worries if I'm too late," Karen said lamely. She didn't know what else to say. She didn't want to talk to Malinakis. She didn't want him to know why she was there.

"Look, you can always phone," the boy said. "Don't sweat it, okay?"

Karen nodded silently.

"Hey--you don't look so good," Malinakis said after Karen had taken off her hat and coat. "Your face--"

"It's just wind-chill," Karen cut in, dabbing a finger against her skin. "It makes my eyes tear."

Malinakis had an empty beer bottle in his hand. He held

it up. "Want a beer?"

"No--nothing," Karen said. Self-consciously she sat on the edge of the worn sofa-bed where she and Vavaris had often made love. She had never been alone in the apartment with anyone else, and Malinakis' presence now, made her edgy. She turned to watch him as he opened another beer in the alcove kitchen.

"Are you certain Johnny didn't say why he would be late?" she asked again.

"Hey--look, I told you--don't sweat it," Malinakis said. "If he shows, he shows. If he don't--what ya' got to worry about, he'll be around." He sat close to Karen on the couch, the beer bottle cradled in his large hand. "Whatsa matter, you 'fraid of me?" He put his arm roughly around her shoulder.

Karen leaned away from him. "Peter!" she said sharply, "I don't think Johnny would like to come in and find you with your arm around me."

"Oh yeah! Well, I don't think he'd mind so much," Malinakis laughed. "Why don't we find out?" The arm around her shoulder tightened, and Karen stood quickly to escape his embrace.

"Peter! Come off it--I don't want to fool around!" she said angrily.

Malinakis smiled and swallowed at his beer. A silent minute passed. Karen reached for her coat, about to leave, when a key turned suddenly in the lock and Vavaris glanced inside the apartment.



"Oh--hi," he said stiffly, stepping inside. "Sorry I'm kinda late, got caught up with something, and with this damn snow blowing it's hard to get anywhere."

Karen watched him without speaking and a look of discomfort passed across his face. "Look--ah--is this--this talk of ours going to take long? I'm a little short on time."

"What do you mean you're short on time?" Karen asked in a puzzled voice. "I told you I have to talk to you. It--it can't be done in a couple of minutes. Why do you think I wanted to see you here tonight?"

Vavaris shrugged. "Look, Karen, we've been through this before. Things come up. I did what I could to arrange things, but--ah--you know.... Maybe we can get together tomorrow. I'm --ah--free tomorrow."

"No! It can't wait for tomorrow. I don't want to talk tomorrow. I want to talk now!" Karen cried out. The emotions she had managed to control since she had arrived at the apartment again welled up in her. She felt weak and dizzy, and at the same time anger threatened to overwhelm her and send her plunging towards hysteria.

She reached inside the pocket of her sweater and her fingers felt the slip of paper with the results of the pregnancy test. She could throw it in his face, scream that he was going to be a father, that the baby growing inside her wasn't waiting for a more convenient time. But she couldn't. Not with Malinakis

there--his ugly face watching and listening. Why was he there? Why didn't he leave?

Karen saw that Vavaris wanted desperately to avoid their confrontation, but she couldn't let him go. She had to keep him there. Talk to him. Make him understand what was happening so that he would help her--so that she wouldn't have to be alone.

"This important thing that's come up," she said, her voice mingling despair and sarcasm. "It wouldn't happen to involve a certain teacher would it?"

"What are you talking about," Vavaris said accusingly.

"You know perfectly well what I'm talking about. I'm talking about you and Kellner. Don't think I don't know. Don't think I haven't seen the two of you together when you've had other important business to take care of."

Malinakis broke out in loud, harsh laughter.

"Shut up!" Vavaris yelled at him. Then he turned to Karen. "You're nuts!" he exclaimed. Miss Kellner has been helping me with some school work, that's all. Sure--I've been with her. I didn't tell anybody because I didn't want anyone to know I was getting tutored. But it was only for extra work--I swear!"

"You're a goddam liar!" Karen sobbed, her voice cracking as she broke into tears.

"I'm not going to argue with you now," Vavaris said strongly. "We'd just be wasting our time." He began to back towards the door of the apartment. "Why don't you just sit down and take it

easy. Malkie will take care of you. Stick around and pull yourself together." He glanced towards Malinakis and signaled his need to escape in a silent, hurried pantomime. "I've got to go," he said, closing the door behind him. "Don't worry Malkie will take care of you."

When he had gone, Malinakis stood and moved closer to the sobbing girl. "Hey, take it easy, baby," he said gruffly. "You heard what the man said. He wants me to take good care of you." He reached out and began to stroke Karen's arm.

Karen gasped at his touch and pushed away his hand. "Don't touch me!" she cried. She leapt suddenly to her feet and ran for the door, fleeing into the dim apartment hallway before Malinakis could prevent it.

The boy moved to the doorway as Karen rushed down the stairs and out into the snow-covered street. "Ahhh, screw yourself, you goddamn bitch," he snarled at her disappearing back.

Karen wandered aimlessly. The storm had reached the peak of its intensity, and the wind cast blinding gusts of snow through the air. She was distraught. Her thoughts fled before her like sparks on a flintstone, moving so quickly she couldn't grasp them, couldn't hold one long enough to understand it. She only knew that she couldn't go home, couldn't face her mother with the fear and confusion inside her, and knew also, that if she didn't find shelter she would not survive the storm.

She thought again of dying, of lying on a quiet, white

blanket of snow and drifting into a painless sleep. But something held her. Something kept her on her feet, leaning against the blowing wind.

Almost without conscious thought she found herself standing in the snow before Pat Ender's apartment. She had known Pat's address since September when she had looked it up in the phone-book, and several times she had passed Pat's apartment while riding the bus. Now she stood by the downstairs buzzer, shivering and frightened. She stood there for some time, unable to ring the bell, staring at the row of shining mailboxes with the small white buttons above them. She had begun to cry, and waited for the tears to subside. Slowly, but at last, she pressed the bell.

When Pat Ender saw Karen at the door, she was shocked. The girl was shaking with cold. Melting snow was tangled in her wind-blown hair, and her face was raw and chafed.

"My God, Karen! What's happened to you?"

"Ohhh, Pat," Karen sobbed, throwing herself into the older woman's arms.

Pat led her into the living room and brought her a warm blanket. "You're soaking wet," she said. "You'd better take off your clothes and wrap yourself up in this. I'll get a towel for your hair."

She put on a pot of coffee while Karen undressed and got beneath the blanket on the living room couch. Karen had stopped crying and struggled to gain control of herself.

When Pat returned from the kitchen she held two steaming cups of coffee. "Do you want to talk about it?" she asked gently.

Karen nodded. She sipped slowly from the cup and met Pat's eyes with her own. "I'm pregnant," she said solemnly.

"I see," Pat said softly. "And the father--John Vavaris?"

Karen nodded a second time. "I saw him tonight--but he doesn't know. I couldn't tell <sup>him</sup> him. He--he didn't want to talk. He left me--telling me that--that his friend Malinakis would take care of me. Oh, Pat, he just doesn't care anymore. I don't know what to do!" Again tears welled in her eyes, and she bit her lower lip in an effort of control.

Pat put her arm around the girl. "Okay Karen, don't worry. We'll see what we can do. Just don't worry, we'll work it out."

They talked, discussing Karen's affair with John Vavaris. Karen told Pat of her suspicions concerning Vavaris and Reena Kellner, and Pat felt the stirrings of her own anger. They talked about what had happened, and Pat did her best to make Karen understand that the world had not come to an end, and like the storm outside, the circumstances of her life would change and be replaced, renewing themselves in the present--in the time that was--while the past, like the winter snow, became a faded memory.

Pat learned that Karen had few illusions about her relationship with John Vavaris, that she understood the limits of their encounter, and that she had begun to accept those limits for what they were.

They spoke, as well, of Karen's pregnancy.

"Have you thought about an abortion, Karen?" the teacher asked.

Karen's eyes closed, and her head moved fractionally. "Yes," she whispered. "When I was ~~out--in~~ the snow--I thought I wanted to die. A part of me wanted to lie down in the snow and never get up again. But I couldn't do it. I couldn't stop walking. And I knew I wasn't going to let myself die--that I had to come to you because I wanted to live--and that the only way I could ever survive this--this pregnancy--would be--would be to have an abortion."

"You could have the baby, Karen. Even without John--without a husband. Plenty of women do it."

Karen shook her head. "No--no, I couldn't. I think it would kill my mother. She--she wouldn't be able to understand. And Pat, I'm--I'm not ready to be a mother. I'm not even ready to go through this pregnancy. I still have to find my own life. A mother should be strong and ready for a child--and I'm not ready, I know I'm not!"

"I understand," Pat said sympathetically. "But are you ready for an abortion, Karen? There's a price to pay for that, too, you know. Not just in money, but an emotional price. Can you pay that price if you have to?"

"I don't know, Pat. I just don't know. I'm scared. I'm really scared! I just can't think of any other way--I don't

see any other choice."

"Just be sure, Karen. Think about it and be sure. And if you do decide on an abortion, I think I can help you arrange it. I know some people."

"Ohhh, Pat," the girl cried, covering her face with her hands, "what would I do without you?"

"No need for thanks," Pat answered. "That's what friends are for. Just don't worry, we'll get your life back to normal in no time at all."

Karen sat up quickly, her face masked in alarm. "Time! Oh God, what time is it? My mother will be frantic!"

Pat looked at the clock on the wall of her living room. "It's after eleven," she said.

"Oh Lord, I should have been home long ago-- especially in this weather. Can I use your phone--I'll have to call."

Pat had gone to the window and was peering out through the drapes. "I don't know if you'll be able to get home in this storm, Karen. It's even worse now than it was earlier. Let me check before you call home." She turned on the radio receiver of the small stereo by the couch, and quickly flicked across the dials. Then she went to the phone, dialed, and listened briefly to a recorded message. Karen sat quietly by the radio.

After a second call, Pat slumped onto the couch. "I'm afraid I can't see you getting home tonight," she told Karen. "I called the transit people and they said that most bus lines

had already stopped running, and that the ones still on the road were having a lot of problems. On top of that, the weather bureau says the snow might keep falling until tomorrow.

"Oh God--my mother's going to die," Karen lamented, shaking her head. "I just told her I was going to study with Peggy Manesiotis. How am I going to explain that I'm at your house and that I can't get home."

Pat thought for a moment. "Well, if you think it will help, you can always say that you and Peggy dropped by for some extra help, and now you're both stuck. It's not much of an excuse, but it's all we've got. Will your mother have called Peggy's to see if you're there?"

"No, She doesn't know her number--or her last name. I'm sure of that."

"Then it should be alright if you say you're both here with me."

Karen nodded tentatively. "She's still going to have a fit. She'll ask me why I didn't call earlier, and I won't have a good excuse."

"I'll talk to her if you think it will help," Pat volunteered.

Karen called, but said very little at first. Even from where she sat on the couch, Pat could hear the shrill, excited ring of Mrs. Hudak's voice. Finally, Karen explained the story she and Pat had invented. When she was done, she held out the phone towards Pat.



"She wants to talk to you," Karen said, covering the mouthpiece of the telephone with her hand. "I don't think she believes me."

Pat took the phone and repeated Karen's story to her mother. She assured Mrs. Hudak that it was no inconvenience and that she shouldn't worry, that Karen would be home in the morning. When she hung up, Karen smiled in relief.

"It's nice to see you smile again," Pat said.

"Was I smiling?" Karen asked. "Yes—I guess I was." She hesitated. "You've saved my life twice tonight. You should get a medal or something."

The older woman looked at the girl seriously and took her fingers gently in her own. "We all need a helping hand sometime," she said earnestly. "I'm just glad I was around when you needed me."

Karen lifted her teacher's hand and pressed it to her cheek. "Thank you, Pat," she murmured softly.

They ate dinner when Karen suddenly discovered that she was famished, and Pat was pleased to see that Karen's mood had changed, that her despair, for now, had left her, and that she had regained some of her quick sense of humor.

As they ate, Karen laughed about being snowed in until spring and how her mother would probably try to reach then by dogsled.

When bedtime came, Pat gave her an extra pair of pajamas and slippers with a hole in the toe. "The couch is really uncomfortable

to sleep on," she explained, "and I have a great big double bed. Why don't we share it, and you can get a good night's rest."

"Will you tell me a bedtime story?" Karen asked in fun.

"No, but I'll tan your bottom if you don't behave yourself,"

Pat said as the two women climbed under the blankets.

There was a television on a rollabout stand at the foot of the bed, and for a while they watched the news of the blizzard as it shut down the city.

Later, with the lights out, they said goodnight.

"I know you must be tired of hearing this," Karen said, "but thanks again for everything."

"Please Karen," Pat protested. "Don't thank me again, or I'll begin to regret it. We heroines can only take so much thanks you know--then we turn back into ordinary teachers who give detentions and homework."

They laughed, and then grew silent. Karen felt the woman beside her stir and opened her eyes. The room was dark, the windows covered with heavy drapes. She could just make out a faint, curving silhouette on the far side of the bed.

Pat began to speak. Softly. Her voice almost a whisper, as though Karen might already be asleep and she feared waking her. "Karen, I--I have to tell you something. You've come to me with your troubles as one friend to another, and I wouldn't be doing that trust--that friendship--any justice, if I didn't make a confession of my own and start us off on equal footing. You

see, Karen--" She stopped, and in the dark Karen could hear her sigh. Finally, she began to speak again. "I'm--I'm gay, Karen--a lesbian--do you understand?"

Karen nodded her head in the dark and then realized that she couldn't be seen. "Yes, I understand," she answered slowly. "Were you afraid to tell me, Pat?"

"Yes"

"You didn't have to be. I already knew."

Pat lifted herself slowly on one elbow. "What do you mean, you already knew?" she asked in surprise.

Karen giggled, then quickly put her hand over her mouth.

"I'm sorry I laughed," she explained, "but you sounded so worried."

"I am worried, Pat exclaimed. "You didn't really know, did you? You were just kidding."

"Well--I guess I really didn't know for sure. I mean, you hadn't said anything. But sometimes we would get together-- my girlfriends and I--we would talk about our teachers--who was nice, who was married, which men we'd like to kiss--silly things like that. And, well, most of the girls thought you weren't married because no one had asked you, and at first I just accepted that idea like everyone else. But then, as I got older, I began to think it probably wasn't true that you hadn't been asked-- after all, you were attractive, intelligent--things a man should like in a woman.

"And to me that meant you didn't want to get married. And

when I latched onto that little idea, I began to listen to you more closely in class, and I began to pick up on a few things."

"Like what?" Pat asked curiously.

"Like how often you put down men as being unsympathetic characters, and how you talked about women--especially famous women--and pointed them out to us."

"I just wanted to give you a few examples of women who made something of their lives."

"Yes, and you succeeded. But I kept on wondering why. And I began to notice how you dressed and walked--and how you were always very direct and self-assured and confident. Then finally I realized that when you talked about your friends they were always women--never men. And I guess I put two and two together."

"I want you to know this is shocking news to me," Pat said.

"Oh Pat, I hope it doesn't bother you. I'm not the--the only one, you see. Some of the other kids--especially the boys--have said that you must be a lesbian. They think so because you never wear make-up or skirts or anything. They're only guessing of course--they say the same thing about half the teachers in school--but I have heard them say it."

"Oh Jesus!" Pat sighed.

"Pat--please--" Karen began.

"It's okay, Karen--it's okay," Pat said, cutting her off.

"It's just that I've been undercover for so long I don't quite know what to think. Listen--please--don't tell anyone about

this, will you? I'm not quite ready to come out about this, and if people speculate I can't stop them, but I'd rather not have you tell them I told you. Will you do that for me? Keep it quiet, I mean?"

"Yes, of course I will," Karen said.

"And Karen?--It doesn't bother you? It doesn't change things?"

"No, Pat--it doesn't change anything at all." Karen moved closer to the woman, found her face with her hands and kissed her softly on the cheek just below the eye. "My aim is lousy in the dark," she said.

Pat reached out and squeezed the girl's hand. "Goodnight Karen," she whispered.

"Goodnight Pat. Sleep well."

For what seemed a long while, Pat Ender lay awake in the dark. When, at last, she fell asleep, it was to the peaceful rhythm of Karen Hudak's sleeping breath.

Karen woke with a start, forgetting for just a moment where she was, whose bed she slept in. Then she remembered and her body relaxed. She remembered that her conversation with Pat had not been a dream, and that now they shared a secret part of their lives with one another.

Pat came into the room with a tray of toast and orange juice. She was smiling, though her face seemed pale and tired, and tiny

lines, like crow's feet, puckered at the corners of her eyes.

Karen glanced at the clock on the bedside table.

"You can relax," Pat said. "It's early."

"I'll still bet my mother is pacing the street in her nightgown waiting for me to get home," Karen said with a small smile.

"You can call her and tell her I'll have you home right after breakfast," Pat said. "The road crews have cleared the streets, and my car has been in the garage, so I'll be able to give you a lift."

"Oh, you don't have to go out," Karen protested. "I can take the bus."

"It's no problem," Pat insisted. "Besides, I have to get to the supermarket anyway. I'm beginning to feel like Old Mother Hubbard."

Karen called home and found that her mother was far more calm and relaxed than she had expected. She suspected that her mother didn't want to insult Miss Ender by being too anxious about her welfare.

When breakfast was over, Pat drove Karen to her front door.

"Goodbye Pat. I'm trying not to say thank you again, but it's awfully hard."

"I know," Pat said, "I sort of feel the same way. You take it easy this weekend, and I'll see you on Monday."

As Pat drove off, the wheels of her car slipping on the

snowy street, Karen turned and walked towards the small two-story building where she lived with her mother. As she approached the door someone called out her name. She turned towards the sound, but the sun's reflection on the fresh new snow flashed in her eyes, and she couldn't see who called her.

A man approached her from the doorway of the small candy store on the far side of the street. When he got close, Karen was surprised to see that it was John Vavaris. She turned away and began to walk quickly towards the door of her mother's second-floor flat.

Vavaris grabbed her arm and roughly whirled her about. "Karen, for Christ's sake wait a minute!" he shouted.

"I don't want to talk to you."

"Karen--damn it--I've been standing in that store over there for an hour waiting for you to come home. I want to talk to you."

"I wanted to talk to you--last night," Karen said angrily.

"But you were too busy! Now you want to talk, so of course I have to agree and go along with it. Well, no thank you, Your Majesty, I'm not in the mood!"

"Karen, Please! I was worried," Vavaris pleaded.

"Oh God, that will be the day!" Karen exclaimed, her voice a blade of sarcasm. "I'd really like to see you worry about someone besides yourself."

"I was worried," Vavaris insisted. "I went back to the apartment last night, and Malinakis told me you had suddenly

ran off--that you were crying and that he couldn't stop you from leaving. I tried to call your house to see if you were alright, but your mother said you were away for the night, and then she hung up on me. I couldn't figure out where you might have gone, and when I called again this morning your old lady said that you still weren't home, but that you'd be in soon, so I--I came down and waited for you."

"So now you've seen me," Karen said, the hardness still in her voice.

"Hey, listen! Don't you believe me? I was worried about you."

"You don't have to worry, I can take care of myself."

"But where did you stay last night?"

"I stayed with a friend. That's all you have to know. Do I ask where you spend your nights?"

"Wasn't that Ender's car that dropped you off. Is that where you stayed? Is she your friend?" Vavaris sneered.

"What if it is? What's it to you?" Karen asked sharply.

"You know what people say about her," Vavaris said angrily.

"I've told you what she is--she's a dyke, a queer--and you spent the night with her. What the hell are you anyway?"

"I'll tell you what I am, Mister self-righteous Big-mouth smart-ass--I'll tell you what I am!" Karen said furiously. "I'm a pregnant girl--a very pregnant girl who went to her boyfriend to tell him and found him too busy to talk and too busy to care,



but ever so ready to leave her in the good hands of his disgusting pimple-faced moronic friend. I'm someone who wanted to kill herself but didn't because someone was there--because someone cared when it counted--that's who I am, you bastard! And I don't care what Pat is--I don't care! I love her more that I could ever love you." She whirled quickly and strode towards the door of the flat.

For a moment Vavaris was stunned, and Karen had almost reached the door before he fully realized what she had meant. He lunged after her and again tightly grasped her arm. "Why didn't you tell me!" he exclaimed excitedly.

Karen stared at him for a long moment, ignoring the pain his fingers inflicted on her arm, her face a thin white mask of fury. "I'll tell you this," she said at last. "And I want you to listen carefully so that you don't ever forget. I don't want this baby, Vavaris--and I'm not going to have it! I'm having an abortion--do you understand? And Pat Ender is helping me arrange it. I don't want this baby--I don't want you--so I'm getting rid of both, once and for all!" She pushed away from him, breaking his grip on her arm, opened the door of the apartment with her key and stepped inside slamming the door angrily behind her. She was surprised that she felt only a sense of rage and violation; that the sorrow which had held her so closely was now but a small and distant voice.

Her mother called out from the head of the stairs. "Is that

you, Karen?"

"Yes, mother, she sighed. "It's only me."

Vavaris stood in the street in front of Karen's door. The news of her pregnancy had caught him by surprise and he was still stunned by it. For a moment he considered pounding on her door and dragging her outside until they had worked it out, but he had seen how upset she was and he knew it would only serve to make matters worse.

As he stood there in the cold shadow of the house, his shock slowly evolved into an anger of its own. What right did she have to say she was getting rid of him? She had been willing enough to screw him when he wanted it, and he was the father of the baby. If she wanted to get rid of it that was fine, but she should have asked him--should have come to him first, not run to that faggot art teacher. He wasn't going to let it happen. He wasn't going to be cut down and thrown away. It was his responsibility and he would take care of it.

He glanced up at the curtained window of Karen's apartment and then marched off, cursing the snow and the winter, and cursing the fate that involved him with women who were more trouble than they were worth.

Striding quickly, he made his way to the Pericles Poolroom on Park Avenue, not far from the apartment. It was here that he and his friends spent most of their free time.

When he arrived he was still angry and disturbed, and largely

ignored the greetings of the others who were gathered around a pooltable at the rear of the hall. Instead of joining them he sat on a stool at the coffee counter by the front door.

Peter Malinakis watched from where he sat on a wooden bench in the far corner of the poolroom. He could see that Vavaris was upset and curiosity prompted him to saunter over to the empty seat beside his friend.

"Did you find her?" he asked.

Vavaris looked at him sullenly.

"Hudak." Malinakis repeated. "Did you find the bitch?"

"Why don't you shut up!" Vavaris barked, annoyed by the question and by Malinakis' presence.

"Hey--what's with you man? I only asked a question."

"What do you want to know everything for? Who the hell are you?"

"Hey--wait a minute! It wasn't my big idea to be there last night. You were the guy who said, 'Stick around the apartment, maybe you'll be able to help me out with Karen,' remember pal?"

"Yeah--well it's different now. I don't want you or anyone else going near her--you got me?"

"Hey man, you're nuts. One minute you--".

Vavaris grabbed his arm and swung around on the stool to face him. Malinakis knocked his hand away and jumped to his feet.

Spiros Kykkotis, the grey-haired owner of the Pericles, called out in Greek and quickly moved towards the two boys. The

last thing he needed was another fight. "Hey! no-no-no! You want to fight--outside!" he called out.

The two friends stared angrily at one another. They had never fought before, but both knew that it would be a hard, even match. Malinakis was still surprised by the intensity of Vavaris' mood, and although angry himself, could not help but notice the look of rage in the other's eyes. "You'd better take it easy, man," he said roughly as he stepped away and walked towards his coat on a rack by the door. "Just take it easy." He left the poolroom, slamming the door behind him.

"Shit!" Vavaris muttered to himself, secretly pleased that Malinakis had backed down from a fight and that he was still top man of the gang.

"Hey, you relax now, Johnny. Have a good cup of coffee," Spiros Kykkotis said, placing a steaming cup in front of Vavaris. "No charge this time."

Vavaris nodded at the old man just as someone tapped him on the back. For a moment he tensed for the blow that might follow, and then willed himself to relax. Malinakis had left, and no one else had any reason to fight.

He looked back over his shoulder and saw Bobby Bower grinning at him with his wide, lop-sided grin and his thick glasses.

"You and Malkie have a fight, Johnny?" Bobby asked, still grinning.

"What is this?" Vavaris demanded, throwing his hands in the

air. "A guy can't even sit down for a cup of coffee without being bothered by every nut in the place. Why don't you just leave me alone, Bower!" He couldn't believe it. The very day he just wanted to sit by himself and Bobby Bower had to be there. Bobby liked to hang around the Pericles, but usually his father wouldn't let him and he wasn't there too often.

"I just wanted to say hello, Johnny," Bobby whined. "No harm in saying hello to a pal, is there?" I just thought you and Malkie looked like you was fightin' and I wanted to see if things was okay, Johnny, that's all."

"So now you know."

"I didn't want you to get mad, Johnny. I just wanted to say hello. Can I get you another coffee, Johnny? Can I, Johnny?" Bobby sat on the stool beside Vavaris.

"Listen Bower, can't you take a hint? I don't want creeps bugging my ass. Can you understand that? You're a little strange, Bower. Things don't seem to sink through that thick skull of yours. I don't want to talk to you. I don't want to sit with you. I don't want to be in the same room with you--do you understand me?"

"But Johnny, I--"

"You're a creep, Bower. A strange little creep. You bug everybody, and nobody can stand your guts. Now just crawl off before I stomp you!"

Bobby stared at Vavaris for a small, startled moment, a look

of grief and confusion smearing his face. His mouth began to work as though he were trying to speak but there was no sound. Vavaris had turned away, staring into his coffee cup, and Bobby slowly stood up and walked away. He put on his worn plaid jacket and left without a word. The others, still engaged in the game of pool had witnessed the whole incident. They glanced at one another and shrugged their shoulders. Vavaris would come out of it in his own time. For now it was better just to leave him alone.

At the counter Vavaris asked Spiros Kyykotis for change of a quarter.) He walked to the phone by the toilet, dialed, and blocked his ear from the noise of the poolroom with his free hand.

At home, Reena Kellner swore as the phone rang. She decided not to answer, ignoring the hollow, irritating clamor, but as the rings continued her resolve broke down and she yanked the slender phone from its curving cradle.

"Who is it?" she asked resentfully. "Oh--it's you--sorry, I was--ah--sleeping. What? When? Look, can't we--what? Okay, okay. Yes. Yes. Okay, see you then."

She hung up. clucked her tongue in exasperation and turned to the man who had just returned from the bathroom. The man knelt on the bed and began to caress her naked breast with his hand.

"Bill--look--" Reena began to explain. "Did I tell you last night that I was a teacher?" Reena had met the man in a bar during the storm the night before and had gotten drunk enough to

forget almost all of their conversation. She hadn't intended to meet anyone, and would not have ended up in a bar if Vavaris had been able to stay with her, but the storm had spoiled their plans. Vavaris had called to say that the buses had stopped running and that he wouldn't be able to make it. Being abandoned like that had annoyed her, and after a couple of hours in her quiet apartment she had showered and changed and fought her way through the blowing snow the short block from her apartment to the neighbourhood bar. The bar had been almost deserted, but at midnight Bill had stumbled in, stranded for the night, and Reena had brought him home and now she had to get rid of him.

The man called Bill nodded in response to her question. He had met this strange, attractive woman the night before, and he remembered her wild, gyrating hips and the fierce gutter language she had spoken while they made love.

"That was one of my students on the phone," Reena continued. "He has a problem he wants to talk over. I'm the only teacher in the school that the kids feel they can come to. I'm the only one they trust. The other people there don't give a damn about anything but their paycheck. I'm really the only one the kids can talk to." She pointed to the white cube table beside her bed and the small clock-radio that sat upon it. "My students gave me that radio for Christmas. They really like me, you know."

"And they don't even know the best part of you," Bill said, continuing to stroke and squeeze her breast.

Reena accepted the compliment with a coquettish smile, and didn't move to stop his hand in its exploration.

"This student," she said softly. "He's coming over. And --and it would be best if you weren't here."

"You mean I should just leave?" the man said, his forehead wrinkling. "Just when I'm beginning to feel so good." He took Reena's hand and placed it against his naked groin.

"Reena's fingers closed around him and she sighed. "We'll have to hurry," she whispered, leaning back against the pillow. "He'll be here soon."

When Vavaris arrived, Reena had just stepped out of the shower and was wearing her blue velvet bathrobe. Her hair had been combed, but except for a touch of blush on each cheek she wore no make-up. Vavaris was surprised by the dark, puffy skin beneath her eyes.

"I wouldn't have bothered you," he explained, "except that I got a real problem, and you're the only one who can help."

"What is it this time?" Reena asked, suspecting that Vavaris had once again found himself in trouble at Parkview.

"I've knocked someone up," he said calmly.

Reena looked at him. "Pregnant? You little fool. How could you let that happen?"

Vavaris shrugged. "It happened, that's all."

Reena continued to stare at him, her eyes growing harder.



"You've been screwing around with someone else while you've been sleeping with me, haven't you?" she said accusingly.

"Vavaris looked puzzled. "You knew I had a thing going with Karen Hudak. I couldn't just break it off."

Reena laughed. "So you got her pregnant instead. Now that's bright. And Karen Hudak, too. Of all the little bitches to knock up, you have to choose her. She'll get all the sympathy, you know. I can see the headlines now: Smart little good girl seduced and raped by greasy Greek troublemaker. They'll hang you out by the balls to dry."

"Nah," Vavaris protested. "It isn't going to come to that."

Reena slammed her hand against the leather cushion of the couch. "Oh no? What are you going to do? Marry her? Buy a little house in the suburbs with a basement and a garage?"

"She wants an abortion," Vavaris said flatly.

"An abortion! I don't dare believe it. The girl actually has an ounce of brain. This must be your lucky day, Vavaris. You should bend over and kiss your ass in gratitude that you aren't going to lose it after all."

"Getting the abortion is the problem," Vavaris said sullenly. "I want to help pay for the thing, but I don't have the money."

"Did Hudak ask you to pay?" Reena demanded.

"No. Just the fucking opposite. She told me she didn't want me to pay. She said she didn't want to have anything to do with me--the bitch."

"Well then, what's the problem? You just got rid of all your troubles."

Vavaris shook his head. "I think Ender is giving her the money," Vavaris said angrily.

"Pat Ender!" Reena exclaimed in surprise. "What does she have to do with this?"

"Karen stayed with her at her place last night. She must have told her the whole story. Now Ender has her fat jew nose in it."

"Why was Karen staying at Ender's place?"

"I don't know," Vavaris shrugged. "She's crazy. We had a little argument and she took off. She does things like that. I found out this morning and gave her shit. I don't want her sleeping with a goddamn queer."

"What do you mean by that?" Reena asked.

"Ender--she's a fag. A dyke. Everybody knows that. Don't tell me you didn't notice. You just have to watch the way she acts, the way she dresses."

"That doesn't mean she's queer," Reena said, "How a person looks and what they really are can be two different things."

"Well, she is queer--I know it. Karen told me."

"What did she say exactly?" Reena asked curiously.

"When I talked to her and gave her shit for spending the night with Ender, I kind of asked her if she knew she had stayed with a queer. She said she didn't care. She said she didn't

care what Ender was, that she loved her."

"You mean Karen actually said that she loved Pat Ender?"

"That's what she said."

"And is Ender supposed to love her, too?"

"Yeah--well, sure. That's what she meant. Why else would Ender have Karen sleep over if she didn't want to get it on with her?"

Reena cocked her head to one side. "And you're sure that Karen spent the night at Ender's place?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. And that's why I don't want Ender around. That's why I don't want her taking care of the abortion. I don't want her near Karen."

"I think you have the right idea," Reena said thoughtfully.

"But I just wonder--"

"That's why I came to you," Vavaris continued, cutting off her thought. "I want to borrow the money for the abortion from you. You're the only one who has the money."

Reena wiped her lower lip with the tips of her fingers. "I have another idea," she said slowly. "Karen sounds like she's giving you a hard time, and she's really in no position to do that. And Ender--you're right--is just putting her nose in where it doesn't belong. Now I think it just might work out better if instead of giving Hudak the money, you just sit back and wait for her to come crawling."

"She's not going to do that," Vavaris argued. "Ender will

just give her the money and--"

"Yes--yes--yes," Reena impatiently interrupted. "Maybe you're right. Just maybe you're right." She snapped her fingers as another idea formed in her mind. "We'll let Ender pay for the abortion, that's what we'll do. That way we can kill two little birdies with one stone, and that would suit me just fine."

"What are you talking about?" Vavaris asked.

"Look," she said sharply. "I don't like Ender, and I don't like Karen Hudak either. I'd be just as happy to get rid of both of them, and I think I know how it can be done."

"I don't follow you," Vavaris said.

"I'm talking about teaching a lesson to two people who made a big mistake when they tried to fuck around with you and me," Reena said, smiling. She would teach them not to be so bloody smart--not to look down at her as if she was dirt to be swept away. Oh, it would be so sweet--and so easy.

Vavaris was shaking his head. "I don't want any more trouble. I just want to get out of this mess."

"Oh--just like that!" Reena laughed. "Snap your fingers and the problem is gone. Come off it, buddy boy! This is for real. This isn't TV stuff with lots of tears and a happy ending. You think Karen can just have the abortion and it all goes away like a bad dream, right?"

"Well think again, my brilliant friend. What if it just doesn't happen that way? What if she dies having the operation?"

What do you do then? Or maybe she's just hurt--bleeding a little--and has to go to the hospital. What then? Is she going to smile and say, 'the good fairy did it'? No way! You'll be in it right up to your neck.

"Or maybe, if you're really lucky, she can just have the kid--and nail you for paternity payments or a rape charge. Now how would that suit you? You could be a daddy-by-mail from the local penitentiary.

"No, you idiot--don't you see? We have to stay clear of this. We have to let Hudak and Ender get involved. Then we can slam the door behind them--discredit them both. Make them both look so bad that you become the innocent victim. It's your only chance."

"No!" Vavaris shouted. "I don't want to do it! Karen will have the abortion--nothing will happen!"

"You little fool!" Reena spat out. "You're playing right into their hands."

"Will you give me the money or not?" Vavaris demanded.

"Unless we do it my way you're not getting a cent," Reena said angrily.

Vavaris wheeled and strode quickly for the door. As he climbed the curving steps that led up from the sunken living room, Reena called to him. "John--please! Don't go!" The tone of her voice had changed completely. As she walked, she slowly unzipped her robe until her small white breasts were fully

exposed, the nipples hard and protruding.

"Why don't we talk about it without shouting," she said. "Why don't we, John?" The robe dropped to the floor and she stepped out of it. "I'm sure we could come to some sort of compromise. One that would make us both happy." She held out her arms to him, her long slim body naked and inviting.

"Do I get the money?" Vavaris asked sullenly, unmoved by her wanton invitation. He was angry. He didn't need sex-- didn't want it, and he knew this was Reena's practiced trap, that her body was a final weapon to win her own way.

"We'll talk about it later," she said huskily.

"Screw yourself!" Vavaris sneered as he turned and left the apartment.

"Reena's pale face went whiter still, and she lunged for the flower vase on the small table by the foot of the stairs. "You bastard!" she screamed, hurling the vase against the door of the apartment. "You fucking bastard!"

Monday morning found Vavaris still angry, but the anger had grown cool and calculated. He had made up his mind. He was through taking shit. From now on he would play his own game. Everybody was out for themselves. That was the only way to operate. Do what you want. If you want something--take it! Screw the rest of them.

He had joined his friends who had gathered in their usual

spot by the benches in one corner of the Parkview High basement. No one had mentioned his unfriendly behavior in the poolroom two days earlier, and even Peter Malinakis had greeted him casually. Only Bobby Bower seemed to remember. He was sitting at the edge of the group, silent and apart. He had not said hello when Vavaris had arrived.

Vavaris glanced at him once, then looked away. He had meant what he said. Bower was a creep, and he wasn't going to pretend any longer that he wasn't. The sooner Bower got the idea the better.

He sat on the backrest of the bench where he could easily command attention, and began to rail against women in general. His encounters with Karen and Reena over the weekend had given him plenty of fuel for the fire. Women caused all the trouble. He could see that now. If they didn't have bodies that could be screwed they wouldn't be worth their weight in dog shit.

"I don't think any of them are any good," Vavaris said when the conversation turned to the merits of individual women. "I haven't found one who was good for anything but balling, and most of them can't even do that right. Please, I'm asking you--name me one thing a girl is good for. You can't trust them. You can't count count on them. They're always out to get you. --'marry me, buy me this, don't do that'--they make me sick I tell you."

"For a guy who hates broads, you sure stick around with them

enough," little Tom Tsakonas said with a laugh.

"Look," Vavaris answered. "I had a thing with Karen Hudak, and that was trouble. Then I had a thing with Kellner, and that was even worse. It's just not worth it. I tell you, I've learned my lesson. From now on--'slam, bam, thank you ma'am'--and that is it! I can't think of one broad worth more than that."

"Miss Arianakis is nice." a voice said from the edge of the group. "She'd be nice to marry." The voice belonged to Bobby Bower, who lowered his eyes as heads turned in his direction.

"What's that you're saying, Bower?" Vavaris asked, winking at the others. "Speak up there, boy."

"I said I know a nice lady," Bobby said, trying to raise his voice. "Miss Arianakis is nice."

"So you like Miss Arianakis, eh Bower?" Vavaris teased. "You got the hots for her, eh? You think she'd be great to come home to, eh? Well tell us, since you're such an expert, are there any other broads around who meet with your approval?"

Bobby hesitated and looked around shyly. "The others all seemed to be waiting for an answer. "Elena is nice," he blurted.

"What did you say, Bower? Elena? Elena who?" Vavaris demanded.

"Elena Giannopoulos," Bobby said softly, his voice falling as he realized Vavaris was pressing him, making fun.

"Elena Giannopoulos--well-well-well!" Vavaris said, addressing the others. "You can see that Bower here really goes for the



hot ones. Swinging Miss Arianakis, the twenty-three-year-old virgin, and flashy Elena Giannopoulos, the school brain who would probably commit suicide if anybody ever told her that men use their cocks for something besides pissing." He turned back to Bobby whose chin now pressed tightly against his chest. The anger Vavaris had felt the day before again surged up in him, and he saw in Bobby Bower a foolish, helpless target for his wrath.

"You know what, Bower?" he said with a leering smile to the boy who sat at the back of the group. "I'm going to do you a favor. I'm going to do you a favor so that when the big day comes and you get to go home to sweet, wonderful Miss Arianakis, or warm and terrific Elena Giannopoulos, they'll be ready for you. After all, Bower, you don't want to go home with a stiff dick and find out that your chick doesn't know what to do with it, do you?"

Vavaris had stepped down from his seat on the backrest of the bench and walked slowly towards the spot where Bower sat cross-legged on the floor. "So I'll do you a favor," he said cruelly. "I'll take them both back to my little apartment and spread their legs and stick my dick right up to their eyeballs. What do you say, Bower? Does that sound like a good idea?" Again he winked at the others, who had now begun to laugh at Bobby's squirming discomfort.

Bower looked up at the boy who stood above him. His eyes

were pained and tearful. "Shut up!" he said, his voice still low and soft.

"What did you say?" Vavaris snapped.

"I said shut your mouth!" Bobby repeated more insistently. "Don't talk about them that way!" He was anxious and confused, fearing the words he was saying, but unable now to hold them back.

"You'd better watch yourself, Bower," Vavaris said menacingly. "You're pressing your luck."

"You can't talk about them that way--you don't even know them," Bobby insisted, his voice wavering.

"I only know what I'm going to do to them, Bower," Vavaris said, the leering grin again appearing on his dark face. "I'm going to make them crawl to me Bower--on their hands and knees --begging for a good stiff fuck!"

Bobby scrambled to his feet, his face flushed with dismay and anger. "You shut up--you--you bastard!"

Vavaris stepped forward and jabbed his finger against Bobby's fleshy chest. "Watch your mouth, creep!"

Bobby knocked away the finger. "Don't touch me or you'll be sorry," he said.

Vavaris laughed and the others joined in. "Oh--listen to this. 'Don't touch me', the man says. I'm shaking in my boots. And just who is going to make me sorry, creep?" He began to tap Bobby's face with light, playful jabs as Bobby stood silently, his eyes filling with tears.

"C'mon Bower, whadaya gonna do about it?" Vavaris taunted.

Bobby replied with a short, sudden swing of his fist, a blow that glanced off Vavaris' shoulder as the athlete's quick reflex pulled him swiftly to one side. Now Bobby was in full rage, no longer able to control himself. An aching, painful screech escaped his lips as he lunged to the attack.

Vavaris retreated, gracefully dodging the first rush. The other students moved and scattered and then began to form a loose circle around the two combatants. Quickly the cry went up that a fight had begun.

There was a tight smile on Vavaris' face. At best, Bobby was no match for him in strength or agility, and now, in his rage, his eyes blinded by tears, he was an easy target. Vavaris went up on his toes, his fists cocked, moving in a smooth, weaving circle while Bobby stumbled and lunged at him with wild, roundhouse punches.

Then Vavaris began to jab, and each well-timed blow found Bobby's unprotected face. The blood splattered on Bobby's shirt and across Vavaris' bony knuckles. But still Bobby came. Blindly, without thought, he continued to fight.

Slowly Vavaris maneuvered himself into a corner and waited for a final charge. Someone whistled shrilly from across the basement, a signal that a teacher was coming down the stairs to the basement.

In one swift movement Vavaris ducked beneath Bobby's wild

swing, grabbed his blood-smeared shirt, and swung him into the corner. He punched quickly, low and hard, forcing the air from Bobby's lungs, causing him to double over with pain. Then Vavaris swung up, his weight behind the blow, catching Bobby full in the mouth, knocking him back into the corner where he slowly crumbled to his knees, groaning in pain, his hands covering his battered face.

When Miss Renaldi, the home economics teacher, walked through the door to the basement, she knew immediately that something was wrong. Students were scattering across the basement, some running, others gripping one another in a paroxysm of excitement. She looked across the basement towards the corner where the students appeared to have gathered. Now there was a single lone figure, a boy kneeling in the corner, his face covered by his hands. He was hurt and bleeding. She began to run across the basement, while the students, whispering among themselves, watched intently.

The school was quiet and deserted. It was almost five o'clock, and only the night janitor was left on duty in Parkview. Upstairs, in their small second floor office, Stephen Chambers and Elena Giannopoulos had just finished the last of the work on the latest edition of the school paper, the Viewpoint.

"Finished at last," Elena said, sinking into an office chair with a heavy sigh.

"It looks like a good issue," Chambers remarked, "It's just too bad we couldn't find out more about the Bobby Bower beating."

The paper had been published and distributed several times, and with each new issue the news and articles had become more direct and more critical of life at Parkview High. Chambers had approved of the paper's direction, seeing it as an opportunity for students to identify some of the school's shortcomings, and perhaps, with time, to rectify them.

That morning they had learned that Bobby Bower had been beaten in a fight in the basement of the school, and had wanted the details as a lead-in to an editorial dealing with violence and vandalism, but they had been unable during the day to gather much information about the incident.

"You know," Chambers said questioningly, "a lot of kids must have seen that fight this morning, but so far nobody has said a thing about how it started or who else besides Bobby was involved. It's a little unusual for something like that to be kept this quiet, don't you think?"

"I imagine it's because people are afraid," Elena suggested.

"What do you mean?"

"The word is going around the school that no one should talk about the fight if they want to stay healthy. I guess whoever sent out the word has just got everyone too frightened to speak up."

"But what about Bobby? That's the strangest part. He simply refuses to admit that he was beaten by someone. You would think he'd want the chance to get a little revenge."

"I guess Bobby can be like that--he has his own way of dealing with things. Or perhaps he's just been frightened too."

"Well, frightened or not, I think we'll all know soon enough. We won't have it for this issue, but sooner or later people will start talking. This kind of thing never stays under wraps for long, and when it does come up, we'll print the whole story in the paper."

Elena glanced at her watch. "We were faster than usual getting this issue ready," she observed happily. "I'm so used to our last minute confusion that I told my mother not to expect me home before seven-thirty."

"How does your mother feel about these late nights of yours?" Chambers asked with a smile.

"She's not overjoyed, I'll tell you," Elena said emphatically. "She always asks why I have to be the one staying late."

"And what do you tell her?" Chambers asked curiously.

"I tell her that's the editor's job," Elena explained. "And besides, I tell her everyone stays late. If she knew that you and I spend all this time working here alone, I think she would have a heart attack."

Stephen Chambers laughed. It was increasingly more difficult for him to relate to Elena as one of his students, a girl whose

mother still watched the clock to see when she got home from school.

Since Parkview had reopened after the Christmas holidays, Chambers had slowly become aware that things were no longer exactly as they had been. Christina Arianakis for example, had something on her mind, a thoughtfulness and preoccupation that somehow, in subtle ways, had made him aware that their relationship was in a state of flux. Outwardly they were as friendly and as warm as ever, but he knew that something was wrong and that they needed to sit down and talk about it honestly. But he felt, as well, that Christina was not quite ready to reveal herself, that she still had things to work out in her own mind. He was willing to wait.

And Elena? Since the start of the spring term they had spent a good deal of time together working on the paper, and they had another in the process. Elena had begun to pick up, her conversation an intriguing blend of wit and observation. "Since you're here," he said with a note of hesitation. "Since you doesn't expect you home until seven-thirty, and it's only after five, why don't you come back to my place for a cup of coffee. That'll give us a chance to discuss that article you want to write on student-teacher relationships, and I can give you a ride home later on."

Elena looked at him in surprise. He had asked her to go

home with him. Back to his apartment. It was like living out a favorite fantasy. She had often wondered what his apartment would be like. How wonderful it would be to be there alone with him.

She felt a small shiver spread along her arms. She wanted so badly to go, to spend time with Stephen. But her mother! If she ever knew. Oh God! Best not to think about it. Just do it --carefully--so that no one ever knew.

"Well--I--" she began, the words faltering as the mingled feelings ran through her.

"What's the matter?" Chambers asked innocently, knowing full well what was racing through Elena's mind. He knew that perhaps he was going too far in his friendship with this girl--this student--but he didn't want to stop and analyze what was happening. He just wanted to let it happen.

"My mother--" Elena tried again, and again the words faltered.

"What she doesn't know won't hurt her, Elena," Chambers said matter-of-factly.

"Yes--I suppose so--" Elena agreed slowly as the dam broke and her resistance washed away. "You're right! What she doesn't know won't hurt her."

"Then we're off and running," Chambers said cheerfully as he took her arm and led her out of the office.

Elena liked his apartment. She liked the pipes across the



ceiling and the way he had attached the plants in the hanging planters. She liked the old, sturdy furniture and the impressive wall of books in the blue bedroom. Chambers gave her the tour and then settled her on the old-fashioned beige couch in the living room. He made a pot of fresh-ground coffee then sat beside her.

"This is really a nice house," Elena said, taking the coffee cup from his outstretched hand. "It's so comfortable. My mother decorated our house, and the last thing you feel like doing in the living room is relaxing. It's more like a showpiece than a room you can live in. Yes--I like your place a lot."

"And I like you a lot," Stephen responded warmly. It felt good to have Elena in his home and he wanted her to know it.

Her eyes dropped to the floor then came back slowly to meet his own. "I like you too," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

"I've wanted you to know that I've liked you for a long time now," Stephen said sincerely. "I don't know why I didn't get around to it before."

"I'm glad you told me," Elena said shyly, her voice still soft and low.

"I think--I think you and I have a chance of becoming real friends," Stephen went on. "I mean--I think we can still be friends years from now--that it doesn't have to end with school in June. Do you understand what I'm trying to say?"

Elena nodded. She did understand. It was what she had always hoped for. Stephen reached out and took her hand in his own. For a flashing moment he wondered why he was telling her this--knowing it was foolish, knowing that the time was wrong for them and that their relationship could not develop because it had no place to go. But it was there to tell--something inside of him that he wanted the girl to know and understand. It made no difference that she was one of his students, that he was years older than she was. As foolish as it might be, he had no choice now but to get it out.

"I want you to know that I've admired you for a long time, Elena. I've admired the kind of person you are--the kind of mind you have. The way you treat people and regard things, I may be your teacher, but I've learned a lot from you, and I think I'll go on learning as long as I know you." He smiled warmly as he spoke. "I guess you're a little confused right now, and I can't blame you. Not many high school girls have to listen to their teacher profess his admiration. But I'm only human, Elena, and I can't help the way I feel any more than the next guy."

Stephen placed his hand under her chin, and as her head lifted he looked into her eyes. There was surprise and confusion and joy in them all at once. He stood, pulling her up with him, his lips touching hers, and her heart beating swiftly against his own. His fingers trembled and a sound that was a whisper of joy caught in his throat.

"Elena--I love you," he murmured. "It's crazy, and perhaps I am too, but I really love you."

Elena looked at him. "It's not crazy, Stephen, it isn't," she said emphatically. "I--I love you too. I have for a long time. It took me a while to accept how deep my feelings for you really were--I was afraid of them--afraid you would laugh if you ever knew. But I was never able to deny them. They were there--a part of me. And when I finally accepted them for what they were--expecting nothing in return--I knew that a part of me would always love you."

Elena reached up and touched his cheek with the tips of her fingers. "I know that I'm only your student--that you know so much more than I do--that perhaps I may sometimes seem foolish to you, but I don't care any more, and I hope you don't care either. People think this shouldn't happen--that teachers should never fall in love with their students. But it does happen! It has happened. We're just people too, and we've spent a lot of time together, and I've grown up a lot since I first met you, and somehow something wonderful has happened. Don't say it's crazy --it isn't!"

Stephen laughed, and lifting her off the ground in his arms, whirled her in a circle. "Okay, you win," he said. "It's not crazy. It's just marvelously insane!"

They sat on the couch and Stephen put his arms around her. They kissed, and his fingers caressed her face. "You know," he

said, "I've discovered that you get wiser and more wonderful every day. What are you going to do in the years ahead when you keep growing and learning and changing, and I stay the stagnant old fool that I am."

"You don't have to worry," Elena said with a smile. "With me to pester you, you won't have a chance to stagnate."

Stephen laughed a warm, comfortable laugh, and they kissed again.

"You know," Elena whispered. "I've never kissed before—not like this."

"Then there's a lot to say for instinct," Stephen murmured, his lips against the curve of her neck.

His hands moved down the length of her arm and slowly back to her shoulder. Her breath came in short, quick gasps and her lips grew warm. Lightly, he touched her breast and met no resistance; slowly he unbuttoned her blouse and his hand moved over her smooth, nylon bra. Her breasts were small but firm, responding to his gentle touch.

"I feel that—all over—inside me," she whispered, and Stephen remembered she had never been with a man. The thought was strange to him, and he became aware of his own tenderness towards the girl beside him.

His hand moved to the flat expanse of her stomach, feeling the tiny ridge of her navel and the cold buckle of her belt. His hand felt the warmth of her body through her clothes as his

fingers moved across the gentle curve of her sex.

He felt her tense, and his hand stopped. "Stephen," she whispered. "I love you—but I can't make love to you." Not now. I—I'm just not ready for that."

Stephen kissed her gently and began to button her blouse. "That's okay," he said gently. "I won't deny that I want you, because I do. But it's not important right now if you sleep with me or not. I don't want you for your body or your innocence. That can all come in its own time. I just want to be able to love you—what's what can make me happy."

Elena put her arms around him and held him. "I knew you would understand—and you do. I am a passionate person, Stephen, I know I am. And in time you'll know as well."

Stephen glanced at the clock on the small wooden table by the couch. "Speaking of time," he said, "It waits for no one—including us! What time did you say you had to be home?"

"Around seven-thirty."

"Oh-oh! It's quite a drive to your place, we'd better hurry or you'll be late."

They hurried to the car and Stephen got it going, letting it idle to warm it before they drove off.

Elena tugged at his arm. "Look!" she said, glancing towards a small grove of trees in the yard just beyond the window of his basement apartment. "Is that someone watching us?"

Stephen peered into the dark shadows thrown by the trees

but saw nothing unusual. "Your imagination is running away with you," he said with a smile.

"No--really!" Elena insisted. "I did see something. It ducked down in the shadows when it saw me looking."

"Probably just the neighbourhood Peeping Tom," Stephen said, the smile still on his lips.

"You mean someone might have been watching us--in your apartment?" Elena exclaimed in embarrassment.

"No--don't worry. The curtain was closed," Stephen assured her. He knew the curtain had been closed, he had closed it himself when they had first arrived at the apartment, but he was also aware that the curtain in the living room was bamboo, and at night, with the light on in the room, it was nearly transparent. Someone could very well have watched them. His shoulders shrugged slightly without gaining Elena's attention. Too late now, he thought.

Elena felt herself pushed back gently against the seat as the car, with its deep muffled roar, moved quickly away from the curb and the darkly shadowed trees beyond it.

Chapter eight:

Karen Hudak sat at a desk in her homeroom class and brushed the hair away from her eyes with the back of her hand. She had slept late that morning and had been rushed to arrive at school on time. Since the night she had stayed with Pat Ender she had not slept well, often lying awake through the night, plagued by her thoughts and her confusion. More than once she had fallen asleep just before dawn, and the harsh jangle of her alarm, following so quickly that its purpose seemed solely to announce her surrender to sleep, was like a knife-edge on her tattered nerves.

Mr. Woodrow, her homeroom teacher, called her to his desk. "This is for you," he said, handing Karen a plain white envelope bearing her name. "It was in my notice box this morning."

Karen glanced at the envelope as she returned to her seat. There was no indication as to what it could be. Except for her name in large, scrawling letters across the front, the envelope was unmarked.

Puzzled, she tore it open. It was a note, hand-written in the same large slanted writing found in the envelope. Karen read the signature. It was signed Reena Kellner. Quickly she read the brief message.

"Anything important?" Mr. Woodrow called out from his desk at the head of the class.

"No--no nothing," Karen responded, quickly putting the note into her shoulder bag.

She couldn't figure out what it meant, and the uncertainty puzzled her. Kellner was not one of her teachers this year, and they really didn't even know one another. So why had the history teacher sent the note in a sealed envelope to her homeroom? Again, Karen brushed away the loose hair that fell across her face. She would find out soon enough.

When the bell rang to end the school day, Karen and Elena found themselves in the same class.

Elena gathered the books off her desk. "If you're ready to leave, I'll walk you to the bus stop," she said to Karen.

"Don't you have to work on the newspaper today?" Karen asked. She had not seen much of Elena lately. Elena's newspaper work and her own affair with John Vavaris had taken them in different directions.

"Not today, thank heaven!" Elena announced. "We finished up an issue yesterday, so today we get a day off."

"You've been putting in a lot of time on the paper, haven't you?" Karen asked.

Elena nodded. "Yes, I have. But it's worth it, I think. It's a lot of fun, actually."

"How does your mother feel about it?" Karen asked curiously.

Elena made a face. "She's not too overjoyed that I'm late coming home from school, but I think she's getting used to it."



At first she used to grill me for all the details--who was there? Who did what? Did the teacher stay until the end--you wouldn't believe the questions." Elena smiled. "I had to learn how to fib a little, and I was grateful for the acting experience we got in the school play last year. But now mother is getting used to it, and I just make sure I bring home copies of the paper to prove how hard I'm working."

"How is Stephen treating you?" Karen asked. "Is he a slave-driver?"

"Oh no, Stephen is wonderful. He works harder than anyone." Elena said emphatically.

"Gee! It sounds like he's really made an impression," Karen said as the two girls left the classroom and began to walk through the crowded, noisy hallway towards their lockers. "I knew you had a crush on him last year--the way you always talked about how nice he was when we were doing the school play--and it sounds as if the infatuation hasn't quite worn off."

Elena looked solemnly at the girl beside her. They had reached Karen's locker, and Karen was dialing the combination of her lock. For Elena it was a moment of decision. Karen was close to her, and even if they hadn't seen much of one another lately, they were still friends--they would always be friends. When they were together, there was just a warmth and understanding that didn't have to be talked about or explained. It was just there, and it made everything alright. Elena felt a rush of affection

and reached out to touch Karen's arm. She glanced around to be sure no one else was near enough to hear and whispered, "It's more than just an infatuation. I'm in love with him." She smiled warmly. It felt so good to talk to someone--someone who could understand.

Karen's eyes widened. "Oh no," she groaned. "Another poor student hopelessly in love with an unsuspecting teacher."

Elena shook her head swiftly from side to side. "No-no! It isn't like that. We're in love. Both of us. With each other!"

Karen looked at her friend skeptically. "Stephen Chambers actually said he loved you?" she stated incredulously.

Elena nodded. "I know it's hard to believe," she admitted. "I can hardly believe it myself."

Karen's face lit up with excitement, and she began to giggle. "My God!" she exclaimed, "you have to tell me everything. How did it happen? What have you been up to in that newspaper office?"

Elena began to laugh with Karen. It was a delicious, secret conspiracy. She began to explain in hurried whispers her early meetings with Stephen Chambers. How one day he had driven her to the metro and asked her to help him with the newspaper, and how, with time, they had been drawn to one another.

She had only begun when Karen glanced suddenly at her watch. "Oh shit!" she exclaimed, cutting off Elena's confession. "I was supposed to see Kellner ten minutes ago!" She grabbed Elena by the hand. "Come with me, Elena. I don't know what she wants,

but it shouldn't take long, whatever it is. Come with me, and then I can hear the rest of your story--please, Elena."

Arm in arm the two girls hurried along the corridor towards Reena Kellner's classroom. The halls were clearing quickly as students hurriedly left Parkview to catch what remained of the fading afternoon sunlight.

"You'd better wait here," Karen cautioned as the two girls approached Reena Kellner's classroom. "God knows what kind of mood she's in by now." She crossed her fingers, waving them hopefully at Elena, knocked quickly at the door and stepped inside.

Elena leaned back against the lockers in the hall. She still felt the glow of excitement she had felt as she had begun to share her secret with Karen. She hoped she was doing the right thing, that Stephen wouldn't be angry if she told him, but she just couldn't keep it to herself any longer.

She could hear the voices of the two women inside the classroom. She hoped Karen wouldn't be too long. She had promised her mother she would be home early.

"I'm sorry, I'm late, Miss Kellner," she hear Karen apologize, "Mr. Bockner stopped me in the hall to ask about some work I owed him."

Inside the classroom, Reena Kellner looked at the girl from stern, piercing eyes. This was Karen Hudak, the pregnant troublemaker. But the bitch wouldn't make trouble for long. She didn't need John Vavaris' permission to destroy Pat Ender--or Karen Hudak.

She knew everything she had to know, and the cards were all stacked in her favor. All she had to do was deal them out.

"I've been sitting here waiting for you," she said in a sour voice. "Do you really think I can afford to waste the whole afternoon?"

"I really am sorry," Karen said, repeating her apology.

Reena continued to stare and did not respond, and Karen noticed that her eyes seemed glazed and clouded, focused not on her face, but on a spot just above her left shoulder. She wondered if Reena had been drinking. There had been stories around school recently that Kellner would sometimes be drunk in class.

"I want to talk to you, Miss Hudak," Reena said after a long silent pause. "And I suggest that you listen very carefully."

Karen remained standing. The tone in Reena's voice had alarmed her, and she realized that whatever Reena was about to say, it would not be pleasant.

"I want to talk to you about John Vavaris," Reena said firmly.

"John and I have had a long talk, and I know all about your--

little problem." She grasped the edge of her desk and pushed

herself to a standing position. "To put it simply," she continued,

"I want you to stay far away from John--far, far away--I don't want you to see him or bother him ever again!"

Karen was startled and felt a rush of blood to her cheeks. Kellner knew! She knew, and she was threatening her.

"I--I don't want to see Johnny anymore," Karen stuttered.

"I don't want anything to do with him."

"Ha!" Reena challenged. "That's what you say now. But wait until your belly is pushing out like a cow's udder. Then you'll go running--begging for help! Involving John in trouble he doesn't need."

"No--I won't!" Karen insisted, brought to the edge of tears by Reena's unexpected attack. "I--I'm not having the baby. I don't want it!"

"Then you'd better get rid of it," Reena hissed. "But you had better not bother John Vavaris."

Karen burst into tears and ran from the classroom. Elena was still standing outside, a look of shock on her face. Karen flung herself into the arms of her friend, crying helplessly.

Elena held her as they walked down the hall, and jumped in sudden surprise as Bobby Bower stepped out from the stairwell.

"Bobby, you frightened me," she scolded.

Bobby became aware of Karen's tears, and the smile disappeared from his face. "You okay, Karen?" he asked sympathetically.

"She's alright, Bobby," Elena answered for her friend. "But we shouldn't bother her right now."

"Miss Kellner did it, didn't she?" Bobby said angrily. "Miss Kellner made her cry."

Elena looked at him. He knew they had been to Kellner's classroom. He must have seen them by the door. "Yes!" she said, no longer wanting to contain her anger. "Miss Kellner did make

her cry: Miss Kellner is crazy!"

Bobby nodded his head. "Miss Kellner is crazy," he repeated.

They turned the corner of the hallway, and Elena saw Pat Ender walking towards them. "Karen, Miss Ender is coming!" she whispered quickly in her friend's ear.

Karen sniffed and wiped her hand across her eyes. Pat had seen enough of her tears.

"Hello Elena. Hello Karen," Pat said, as she approached the two girls. "Why Karen--" she said, seeing the signs of tears on Karen's face, "you've been crying."

Karen, against her will, again burst into tears, and Pat put her arm around her. "Tell me what happened," she said sympathetically.

Elena looked around as Karen haltingly began to explain what had taken place in Reena Kellner's classroom. Bobby Bower had disappeared as quickly as he had come. As Karen continued her explanation, Elena corroborated with frequent nods of her head.

Pat was incensed. "I just don't believe that woman!" she declared as Karen finished her story. "Just who the hell does she think she is!" She turned to Elena. "Will you see that Karen gets home?" she asked. "I have to have a talk with our friend Reena Kellner."

"Oh no, Pat," Karen pleaded. "It will only cause more trouble."

"Karen," Pat explained, "what has been done here is a very

serious matter. Reena Kellner can't be trusted, and she can't be allowed to do things like this. It's gone too far, and the time has come for it to stop once and for all."

Pat left the two girls in the corridor and made her way to Reena's classroom with quick, angry strides. The room was locked and empty. Pat wheeled about and took the stairwell to the first floor. She made her way to the office.

"Has Reena Kellner been in here?" she asked Mrs. Sealson who was still at work at her desk.

"Brought her keys in a minute ago," the secretary answered. "She's probably in the parking lot right now."

Pat half-ran down the stairs to the basement, and out the door nearest the larger back parking lot where she knew Reena Kellner kept her car. She felt a rush of adrenalin and she found Reena still in the lot, warming the engine of her dented green compact.

Pat waved her arms to keep the history teacher from driving off, and knocked at the window of the car. "I want to talk to you," she said harshly.

Reena opened the car door and awkwardly climbed out from behind the wheel. "The window doesn't roll down," she said bitterly, "Whole fuckin' car is falling to pieces." She eyed Pat suspiciously. "What do you want?"

"I'm going to make this short and simple, Kellner," Pat said grimly. "And I'm not going to beat around the bush. I

saw Karen Hudak crying in the hall, and she told me what happened. Now just who the goddamn hell do you think you are? The girl is in trouble and you go out of your way to make it worse!"

"Why don't you mind your own fuckin' business," Reena cut in angrily. "Just keep your nose out of it!"

"I'm making it my business," Pat said, the tone of her voice matching Reena's own. "I'm tired of you and your stupidity. I'm tired of your bad teaching and your foul mouth and your sick mind. You've done enough damage around here, and I'm going to make sure you don't do any more."

Reena laughed shrilly. "And just how do you plan to stop me?" she said, her pale face twisting in contempt.

"For one thing," Pat spat out, "I may tell Mr. Griffen about your drinking problem--and that bottle in your locker! And for another--I may just break every bone in your body!"

Again Reena laughed, and then her arm shot out and pushed Pat backwards, away from the car. "You won't be doing anything, you bitch--you fuckin' pervert!" she shrieked.

"Now you've done it!" Pat snarled, her eyes blazing with anger. There was no way to be civilized with Reena, no warning system that would penetrate the wall of her twisted ego. She only understood the kind of lesson she was about to get.

Pat stepped forward, and as Reena raised her arm to strike, she grabbed the front of her coat and swung her away from the car. Reena would have fallen then, but Pat's grip on her coat



worked to balance her and she regained her footing. Her hand came down and struck Pat sharply on the temple. Stunned by the blow, Pat staggered backwards. Reena stood there like a trapped animal, her chest heaving, her blond hair blowing wildly in the wind, her face a mask of hate and fear. Pat felt almost sorry for the drunken, helpless woman, but the sting of the blow on her skull made the feeling pass. Reena had caused too much harm to be pitied.

Pat stepped forward again, this time ducking beneath Reena's wild swing. She slapped her hard across the face and then, grabbing her by the hair, swung her around and threw her heavily to the ground. Reena cried out and clutched at her knee. Pat stood above her, gasping for air. This was the second time she and Reena had fought, but this time she had no regrets.

"You'll pay for this," Reena sobbed as she staggered clumsily to her feet. "Don't think I don't know about you--you friggin' queer. Don't think I don't know about you and Karen Hudak, By the time--by the time I'm through with you--you won't get another job as long as you live!"

Pat's mouth fell open in surprise as Reena pushed past her and climbed into the car. Reena had called her 'queer', had threatened her with what?--with exposure? Was she guessing, or did she know? How could she know?

Pat felt fear inside her. She had been covering herself for a long time, and now it had all come out. If Reena did know

about her she would carry out her threat, there was no doubt about that.

Pat turned and began to walk back across the empty parking lot. She heard the roar from the engine of Reena's car and quickly moved to one side along the wall of the building. Reena might not go as far as to run her down, but she was drunk and upset and anything could happen. The car drove past, moving much too quickly for the narrow confines of the parking lot. Pat's eyes looked upwards towards the grey sky overhead. 'God forgive me for what I'm thinking, she said silently as Reena's car moved out into the busy traffic of Saint Urbain Street.

The following day was a difficult one for Pat. She spent most of the day in her classroom, waiting nervously to see if Reena would fulfill her threat.

She had noticed Karen's name on the morning list of absentees, and was grateful that she would have a chance to steady herself before they talked again. She would be of little use to Karen if she lost control of her own life.

The call came during the final period of the day. Pat was on a spare, and the artroom was empty. She sat on a metal stool gazing abstractly at the back wall of the classroom and the overlapping layers of student artwork that filled it from corner to corner. When the intercom buzzer sounded she was startled and jerked herself upright, almost tumbling off the

seat.

It was Mrs. Sealson from the office. "Pat? Mr. Griffin would like to see you right after school. Can I tell him you'll be there?"

"Yes," Pat said softly into the intercom. "I'll be there."

When Pat walked into the principal's office at 3:20, the vice-principal, Bob Petersen, was already present. He stood as she came into the office, but Griffen remained seated behind his desk.

"Take a seat, Pat," Griffen said in a calm, serious voice.

Pat sat in the chair directly opposite the heavy-set, grey-haired principal. For a moment she wondered if this was where a student sat if he was sent to the office for misbehavior. Petersen sat on a chair to her right and slightly behind her, and it annoyed Pat that she couldn't see him unless she swung her head to the side.

"I've asked you here to discuss this," Griffen continued, lifting a letter from the green inkblot that covered his desk-top. "But perhaps you had better read it first."

Pat took the letter from its envelope. She was aware that her hands were perspiring, and that her throat felt dry.

She read through the letter quickly, and then again a second time with more care. It had been written by Pat Kellner, and contained an open accusation. In the letter, Reena claimed that Pat was a confessed homosexual who had recently spent the night

with a female student. The letter attacked her morality and implied past and future corruption of other innocent students. It demanded the call for her immediate resignation on the threat that should it not be forthcoming, it would be necessary to publicize the matter in the public interest.

Pat placed the letter carefully on Mr. Griffen's desk.

"Would you care to comment on Miss Kellner's letter?" the principal asked judiciously.

"It's ridiculous," Pat said calmly. Now that she knew what Reena was up to, what her plan was, she felt far less frightened and much more prepared to defend herself.

"Then none of this is true?" Griffen asked hopefully. "You aren't--what Miss Kellner claims you are?"

Pat sighed. The denials were finished. The time had finally come. "No," she said slowly. "That part is true. I am a homosexual."

"Well!" Griffen declared, his cheeks puffing slightly. "This certainly creates a problem."

"I don't see how it creates a problem at all," Pat said sternly. "I've been teaching here for years, and my sexual bias--my private life--was established long before I arrived. It hasn't been a problem before, so I don't see why it should be a problem now."

Griffen unconsciously sat taller in his chair. It was a habit he had acquired in dealing with errant students. "Yes,"

he said curtly, "but we've never had anyone threatening to bring a charge of moral corruption before the School Board before. Miss Kellner has made a very serious charge, and this is a very serious matter."

"Look, Mr. Griffen," Pat said patiently. "I've admitted I'm gay, but I didn't say anything else in that vicious letter is either true or accurate. I deny it all. It's simply a fabrication of Reena Kellner's unstable mind."

"You're saying that you've never had a student stay over in your home then?" Griffen queried.

Pat sighed a second time. "I did have a student stay--once," she explained. "But that was because of a snowstorm--because she couldn't get home--not because of any 'moral corruption'."

"The School Board may not look upon the incident in quite the same way, Miss Ender," the principal said, dabbing his forehead with a handkerchief he had taken from the pocket of his jacket. "They may decide on a full investigation, involve the students, interrogate everyone! It could be quite a mess."

"To hell with the School Board," Pat said indignantly. "If they want to investigate, let them. I have nothing more to hide. And if you're under the impression that I might consider handing in a resignation, you can just forget it! I'm guilty of nothing, and mess or no mess I intend to fight this thing right to the end." She stood and stared down at Griffen's round and fleshy face. "If we need to rid ourselves of anyone it's Reena Kellner!"

She swung quickly on her heels and marched out of the office.

Bob Petersen followed her out. He had sat silently in the office throughout the exchange. Griffen had asked him to be there as a witness, and had shown him the letter before Pat's arrival.

"Pat," he called as she stepped out of the office and into the hallway. "Pat--I just want you to know. If it comes to something. If Reena does make an issue of all this--I'm behind you all the way. I'll do what I can."

Pat tried a brief smile. "Thanks Bob," she said gratefully. "I'll remember that."

Petersen watched her walk down the hall. Perhaps she was right about Reena, he thought. There might be a lot less to worry about if she wasn't on staff. But she was, and that made it awkward. He didn't have enough time to adequately handle student affairs, much less staff problems, and even if certain teachers shouldn't be in the profession, even if they were neurotic or unstable, it was a long difficult job to get them out. Teacher unions were strong, and the schools bore the burden of proof.

Petersen knew that Griffen had suspected Reena's drinking problem for a while now, and that he had avoided taking positive action. He was afraid that Reena would make a scene and that the School Board would get wind of it. Well, Reena was likely to make a scene anyway, and this one could make a teacher's

drinking problem look like child's play.

That evening Pat called Karen Hudak at home. Her nerves were still on edge, but now it was more anger than fear that disturbed her. She was ready to take on Reena Kellner--and Mr. Griffen too, if that's how he wanted it. But right now there were more pressing matters to be concerned with--like Karen's pregnancy. That had to be dealt with before anything else.

"Karen? This is Pat. How are you?" Even on the phone Pat could tell that Karen was still distraught. Now she could sympathize even more. They had both had their nerves twisted.

She explained to Karen that arrangements for an abortion had been made. Her friend Judy was a nurse, and Judy had a doctor friend with a West End practice.

"It's been scheduled for tomorrow morning," Pat explained. "I'm taking the day off school so I can be there with you. I'll pick you up on the corner of Saint Lawrence Street and Duluth at 8:30."

Karen, her voice filled with anxiety, hesitantly agreed.

"Don't be afraid, Karen," Pat reassured her. "It's the best thing for everyone, and it won't be half as bad as you might imagine. When it's over, you can come back to my place and rest for a while. And you'll be home for dinner without anyone being the wiser."

"I'm not really worried about myself," Karen said. "I'll be okay. But I'm worried about my mother. She's had--I don't know--a relapse or something. She's been in bed for two days. My aunt has been sleeping here and taking care of her, but I feel so--so guilty and so helpless. I feel everything is all my fault."

"Karen, you can't feel that way. It's not your fault. I know how difficult it is when everything around you is going wrong, but I promise you it doesn't last. After tomorrow your problem will be gone, and your mother will get well, and spring will arrive and everything will be good again."

"I know you're right, Pat," Karen sighed into the phone. "I just wish it would hurry."

As she said goodbye and hung up the telephone, Pat again became aware that she was not the only one in the world who had problems to deal with. She reflected on the fact that life gave pleasure and sadness to everyone in their turn, and that like life, pain and happiness were two halves of a single circle, one leading into the other without beginning and without end. She knew as well, that no matter what happened between her and Reena Kellner and the School Board, life would go on, and she would go on, and that was all that really mattered.

The following morning, the two women met as arranged. Karen was waiting on the corner, her coat pulled tight around her to



ward off the chilling wind, when Pat arrived. Her face looked pale and weary, her eyes puffed and red from a sleepless night. The operation was arranged for 9:30 in the doctor's office.

They drove most of the way through the city without speaking, Karen lost in her own thoughts, and Pat aware of the girl's need for silence.

When they reached the office, Pat parked the car and Karen reached out and took her hand. "Pat, I'm scared," she said nervously.

Pat squeezed the hand that had been thrust into her own. "You don't have to worry," she comforted. "You're doing the right thing. At this stage the operation is as simple as having a tooth pulled. My friend Judy says the doctor is one of the best. Just try to relax. It'll be over before you know it, and you'll be home before school gets out for the day."

The doctor was a warm, friendly man who did his best to make Karen feel at ease. A nurse took a blood sample and filled out a medical history card and then led Karen to a small examination room off the main office.

It helped Karen to relax when she realized that to the doctor and his nurse, the operation was a quick and simple procedure they had practiced many times before. There was no hesitation or uncertainty here. No question of right or wrong. Like other operations, it was considered a medical necessity. A job to be done in the best and safest possible way.

In deference to Karen's nervousness, the doctor let her know exactly what was about to happen. His voice was calm and pleasant.

"Now Karen," he said. "You don't mind if I call you Karen, do you? I'd like you to just place your legs right up here." With the assistance of the nurse who stood by the doctor's side, Karen placed her legs in the elevated stirrups attached to the table.

"Good," the doctor said. "Now Karen, I'm going to give you a local anesthetic for this operation, and that means you'll be awake the whole time, but won't feel anything. You'll just feel the needle for a moment, and that will be all."

Although her view was blocked off, Karen was aware that the doctor's hands were touching her, that something had been inserted<sup>s</sup> inside her body. She felt the sharp, brief jab of the needle as the doctor injected the anesthetic.

"There we go," the doctor said. "That wasn't too bad, was it?" He stood up from his chair, and Karen could see him, his greying hair and thick dark brows, and as she looked at him, Karen realized that had he been alive her father may well have resembled the man standing before her.

"The worst is over," he said, cutting into her thoughts. Karen looked up at him as he moved beside the bed and gently patted her shoulder. "The procedure I'm using is called vacuum aspiration," he explained. "It's the quickest, safest way to

terminate an early pregnancy. We'll just dilate your cervix a little, insert the aspirator, and it's all done in a few minutes. There may be a little blood spotting—sort of like having your period, but nothing you have to worry about."

Karen made a conscious effort to relax. She liked this man. He wasn't treating her like a little kid who had made a foolish mistake. She was someone with a medical problem and he was there to help. Karen let her mind wander. What was she doing? Was she taking a life? Cutting from her body the small beginnings of a child who would have laughed and cried and lived as she had lived? Or was she simply ridding herself of the seeds of her own destruction? Would the child have ruined her life? Unmarried. Not yet educated. A mother ill and often unable to care even for herself. Would she have come to hate the child, hate herself, turn against a world that had pinned her to the wall so soon, so early in her life, like a butterfly squeezed behind a pane of glass on a study wall.

No, she was doing the right thing. This was the only way. There could still be children. Later, when the time was right. When she was ready to love again.

The doctor was speaking, and the nurse was busy with her legs, covering her with a crisp white sheet. "It's all over," the doctor said, his eyes still comforting and friendly. "We'd like you to rest for a while and get your strength back, and then we'll have another quick look just to make sure everything

is one hundred percent. Is that okay?"

Karen nodded.

"If you'd like, I'll ask your friend Miss Ender to come in and see you now."

Again Karen nodded, a small smile crossing her mouth.

"You've got it," the doctor said, winking at her cheerfully.

Karen rested while Pat sat by her side and kept her company.

When the doctor returned he made his examination and pronounced Karen free to go home. "I don't expect any problems," he said as the two women left his office, "but if there is any abnormal pain or complication just give me a call."

As they drove home, Pat smiled and patted Karen's knee. She still looked pale and tired, but she was much more calm and relaxed than she had been on the drive over. "I'll take you to my place and you can rest there until school gets out," Pat reminded her. "This is a new start, Karen. A new beginning. The past isn't important anymore. It's only what happens from here on in that matters."

It was almost one o'clock when they arrived back at Pat's apartment, and Karen decided to call and check on her mother.

"It's lunchtime at school," she told Pat. "My aunt will think I'm calling from there."

The phone was answered on the first ring. "Hello, auntie?" This is Karen. How's momma?"

Her greeting was answered by a short, sharp silence that

put Karen on edge. When her aunt finally spoke, her voice was cold and bitter. "We called the school looking for you," her aunt said in a thin, hard voice. "They told us you weren't there. That you hadn't come in this morning. We took your mother to the hospital--in an ambulance--I only came back to pick up a few things she might need--I'm going right back. I suggest that you get to the hospital right away."

"Auntie!--Momma? How serious is it?" Karen asked in a frightened voice.

"The doctors--they don't know," her aunt answered. "But this morning she looked--" her voice broke off, then came back firmly. "I have to go. I want to get back to the hospital. Goodbye Karen."

Karen held the dead receiver in her hand.

"Karen? What is it?" Pat asked anxiously when she noticed the girl's trembling face.

"My mother. They've taken her to the hospital. They--they couldn't find me--" Karen whimpered.

"Sit down," Pat urged her. "You have to rest, to take it easy for a while."

"No! I've got to go. My aunt--it sounds serious. I have to get to the hospital." Silent tears flowed across her cheeks.

Pat saw the pain. "Of course," she murmured. "Get your boots on. I'll drive you down."

When Karen arrived at the hospital, her two aunts and her

uncle Thomas were seated in the waiting room. The two women were crying, and uncle Thomas had an arm around each of them. Karen stopped at the door. Her throat tightened in fear. Why would they be crying unless....

Her aunt Freda, her mother's older sister, looked up and saw her. It was Freda who had been on the phone. She pushed her husband's arm off her shoulder and walked towards Karen who still stood motionless by the door. Aunt Freda was a tall thin woman, the bones of her face stretching her skin to a pale translucence.

"She's dead!" the aunt said harshly, her voice loud and raw in the confines of the waiting room. "She died and you weren't here! We couldn't find you--and your mother died!"

Uncle Thomas came forward and pulled his wife gently back to the couch. She sobbed in his arms.

Karen bit her lip to hold back the tears. She had known, even while she had sat in Pat's car on the ride to the hospital, that this time her mother would not be coming home. The last spark of hope had flickered out when she had come into the waiting room and seen her aunts in tears.

Now aunt Freda's words rang in her ears. Her mother had been dying, and they had been unable to find her. The trembling she had first felt at Pat's apartment began again and the room turned slowly before her eyes. Arms reached out and steadied her. Aunt Maggie, the youngest of the three sisters. A kind-

faced woman with blue eyes and rounded shoulders.

"Sit down, Karen," Maggie said softly, putting her arms around her niece and leading her towards a chair. "Please sit down."

The door to the waiting room swung open and a white-frocted doctor entered. He was young, in his early thirties, with dark curly hair and a thick mustache. There was a look of weariness in the pinched corners of his eyes and in the slope of his mouth.

"Is this Karen?" he asked uncle Thomas. It was one of the doctors who had been with her mother. He had been in ten minutes earlier to bring news of Mrs. Hudak's death, and had asked for Karen then. Aunt Maggie told him that Karen had been contacted and would soon arrive.

"Miss Hudak, may I see you a moment?" the doctor said politely.

Karen looked up and saw him motion gently towards the door. Unsteadily she rose to her feet and followed him out into the hall.

The doctor took a sealed envelope from the pocket of his coat and held it in his hand. "Your mother regained consciousness for a few minutes before she passed away," he told Karen gently.

"I thought you would like to know that her last thoughts were of you--that she seemed more concerned for you than she was for herself. Your mother was a brave woman, and I want you to know that I'm very sorry."

Karen pressed her teeth into her lip and large, slow tears coursed the ridge of her nose.

"She gave me this," the doctor continued, handing the white envelope to Karen. "She said she had been carrying it with her for a while, and she asked me to give it to you personally."

Karen gazed at the name on the envelope but couldn't quite make it out as the letters began to swim before her eyes. Then the lights seemed to rush in on her and suddenly blink out, and she felt herself falling in the darkness.

When Karen fainted, it caught the young doctor by surprise. She had crumpled to the floor before he could react, and he felt somewhat foolish. He knelt and felt for her pulse, then checked her pupils. "Nurse!" he called loudly to the floor nurse on duty. "Get a stretcher here--stat!"

Mike Griffen sat in his office and drew small squares on his memo pad with a fine-point felt-tip pen. It was warm in the office, and he felt the perspiration begin to dampen the back of his shirt. He would have taken off his jacket and loosened his tie, but Reena Kellner had asked to see him, and he wanted to be dressed when she arrived.

Griffen was disturbed because he knew why Reena had asked to see him. She wanted to know what he planned to do about Pat Ender. The problem was that he had not made a decision, didn't want to, and had been avoiding it. He was not at all certain



that anything could be done, short perhaps of questioning students about Pat Ender's moral conduct, and he was not about to initiate that. If students got wind of the story there would be all hell to pay.

He could admit to himself that the fact Pat Ender was homosexual really made no difference to her effectiveness as a teacher. It was just such a messy topic to debate in public. Of course, if she did seduce a female student as Reena Kellner claimed, it was an entirely different matter, and the School Board--and even the union--would back up her dismissal. But nothing had been proved. It was simply Reena's word against Pat's.

Griffen fidgeted in his chair and the springs creaked under his shifting weight. If only the whole matter could be done with and finished right here in this office, he thought to himself. Quietly covered up and forgotten before it got out of hand. But of course Reena was not the type to let that happen. She had started something, and he knew she wouldn't easily let it be forgotten. For some reason she was out to get Pat Ender, and he felt certain that moral indignation was not the real cause. Reena should be the last one offended by breaches of morality. Griffen jabbed the pen against the blotter on his desk. There would be plenty to add to his file on staff members when this was done.

His thoughts were interrupted by the buzz of the intercom. "Send her in," he responded to Mrs. Sealson's announcement that Reena had arrived.

The door opened and Reena Kellner marched directly to the side of Griffen's desk. "Mr. Griffen--" she began without prelude.

"Reena, please--sit down," Griffen suggested with a placating smile.

Reena sat, almost reluctantly, and quickly began again. "Mr. Griffen--I'm sure you know why I'm here. Two days ago I gave you a letter containing information important to the welfare of this school. Since I've heard nothing from you since then, I'm here to ask you what's being done."

Griffen leaned back in his chair. "Miss Kellner--Reena--you must be aware that the--ah--information you gave us was of a highly sensitive and--ah--delicate matter. It's not something that can be straightened out in a matter of minutes. I think that--"

"What has to be straightened out?" Reena said abrasively, cutting the principal off. "I've told you what she is--what she's been up to--I think something should be done!"

"As I was about to say," Griffen continued, a touch of firmness edging his voice. "We've had Miss Ender down to speak with us, and--ah--frankly, I'm afraid she contradicts your assumptions. You can see--"

"What!" Reena exclaimed. "How can she deny it? She hit Griffen's desk sharply with the flat of her hand.

"--that we only have your word against hers, and the whole matter has to be investigated with some care," Griffen finished.

"Care?" Reena said sharply. "It sounds like a cover up to me." She stood, leaning forward with her hands on Griffen's desk, her head pressed in his direction. "Maybe Miss Ender should have a chance to defend herself publicly."

"Griffen caught the faint smell of alcohol on Reena's breath. For a moment he considered confronting her, bringing up the question of her drinking habits and the rumors he had heard concerning some aspects of her class room behavior; but he knew it would only open up another can of worms--a dangerous can at that--and he quickly decided to wait for a more propitious time. Instead, he stood, and like Reena leaned forward on his desk. They were of equal height now, but Griffen had the subtle advantage of his porcine bulk.

"Miss Kellner--I want to make it perfectly clear that any decision--or action--that is to take place concerning this matter is mine, and mine alone. Nothing will be made public unless I think it should be. The matter is under investigation, and nothing more has to be done. Is that clear?"

Reena stood back from the desk and the reddish bulk of Griffen's perspiring face and sniffed audibly. "Well!" she said stiffly. "I hope something is done quickly. It would be a crime if things dragged on the way they usually do around here. The school certainly can't operate under conditions like these--and we have the children to consider." She turned and headed for the door of Griffen's office, her rounded buttocks swaying slightly

beneath the short, tight skirt.

As she reached for the door, Griffen spoke. "Miss Kellner-- the world has problems. This school has problems. We all have problems. But sometimes it makes more sense to take care of the problems closer to home than it does to worry about everybody else's problems. "Do you know what I mean?"

Reena looked at the Parkview principal for a long moment. Her eyes flashed but she said nothing. Then she turned and left the office.

Quickly Reena made her way to the staff cloakroom. Griffen's forceful attitude had shaken her. She had imagined as she wrote the letter she had left on his desk two days before that Pat would simply be confronted and fired, or at least that she would be so upset by the disclosure that she would quickly resign. But no--the bitch wouldn't let it be that simple. She had to create problems. But it wouldn't work. Pat might have bought herself a little time, but the end result would be the same. And if they wanted proof--well, she had John Vavaris to back her up, and through him, Karen Hudak as well. Pat Ender wasn't getting out of this one.

Reena looked at her watch. It was still the lunch period and she was alone in the cloakroom. Moving to her locker she drank deeply from the thermos of whiskey and sighed in relief. She drank again, and the image of Pat Ender throwing her to the ground in the parking lot flashed into her mind. "Goddamn bitch!"

she muttered aloud.

Reena replaced the thermos behind the books in her locker and listened carefully for approaching footsteps. It was quiet. She was still alone. She smiled. There was more than one way to skin a cat. She wasn't sure what it was she wanted to do, but she wanted to do something, to strike out, and her eyes darted through Pat's open locker. At first she saw only the few books scattered on the shelf, and Pat's green nylon ski jacket hanging on one of the hooks, but her gaze led to the foot of the locker and there she saw the leather shoulder bag resting on top of Pat's winter boots.

Immediately she knelt and began to rifle through the bag. She knew now what she wanted to do--how she could begin to strike back at Pat Ender.

Her fingers dug quickly through the scattered contents of the bag and excitedly removed the dark brown wallet they had eagerly sought. Reena clutched it to her chest, silently closed Pat's locker and returned to her own. Nervously she placed the stolen wallet beside the hidden thermos. She would remove it later, but for now it was safely hidden.

"This is only the beginning, you bitch," she whispered to the walls. "You'll be more than sorry before I'm through."

She turned, looking back to see that nothing was amiss in the cloakroom and quietly stepped out into the staff kitchen. She would sit in the staffroom now and enjoy what was left of

the lunch hour. The whiskey had soothed her, and the theft of the wallet made her glow with satisfaction. Despite all of them she always got what she wanted.

When the bell rang, Reena stood to leave and suddenly forgot which class she was due to teach the first period after lunch. It aggravated her that classes rotated periods each day, and that she could never keep track. Frowning, she searched her purse for her teaching schedule. Unable to find it at first glance, she angrily dumped the crowded contents of the bag on the staffroom floor. She found the schedule. It was a senior history class. She cursed under her breath. Oh goddamn it, she thought....she didn't have a lesson planned.

Reena went to her knees on the staffroom floor and frantically began to throw things into her purse. John Vavaris was in the history class, and she wondered if he would be there. Her eyes hardened as she remembered that he had walked out on her when she had refused him the money for Karen's abortion. The little fool had better watch his step, she thought acidly, or he'll be learning a lesson or two himself.

When she reached her classroom a little after the late bell had sounded, her previous feeling of euphoria had vanished. She scanned the faces of the students in her class, her head turning slowly as she sought out John Vavaris. Elena Giannopoulos was there, of course. She and the other "brains" wouldn't miss a class if the school was on fire. But where was Johnny? If he

was there they could talk, and she could convince him that she was right, that things were best handled her way. At last she saw him, in the back row of the class by the windows, his head turned away, avoiding her gaze.

Reena felt both relief and annoyance. She was glad that he was in class because his presence might be a sign of repentance, an indication that an apology was forthcoming, and that he had come, at last, to know his proper place. But his distance and his deliberate aloofness was a bad sign. Why was he sitting in the back, and why was he avoiding her eyes with such calculation? Had he come just to annoy her? To show her that it was unimportant to him whether or not she was angry. Whether or not she would give him her help.

Reena's hopefulness collapsed and disappeared as she stared at John Vavaris' slouching form. In its place came a cold ill-humor that spilled out at the world in general.

"Sometimes I'm surprised," Reena said with a calculated calmness. "People never seem to learn their lesson. No matter how much we learn from history or experience, we still go on blundering away, making the same mistakes over and over again."

The class looked up at her, somewhat puzzled, unsure of what she meant and where she was heading.

"And each of us," she continued, "is a history lesson of our own. Just like countries or political factions, we experience things--create our own histories. You see it around you every

day. We all deal with social and economic problems, mold our policies to suit the circumstances, make love, make war, and make mistakes. And some people never seem to learn from those mistakes. Great civilizations have disappeared. Great empires have crumbled. And do you know why? Because they didn't learn from their mistakes. They became pig-headed. They insisted that there was only one way to do something--and that was their way. And people today are no damn different. They get stubborn and pig-headed and think that they're the only one who can be right, and they'd rather kill, or maybe even be killed, before they'd admit that maybe they were wrong, that maybe there was another way."

Reena's eyes moved around the classroom as she spoke, but much of the time she looked towards John Vavaris who had begun to watch her cautiously.

"There are people like that right here in this school," Reena went on deliberately. "Even right here in this classroom. Just look around. Who knows which of us is heading for trouble because we just don't know enough to take some good advice. But are we willing to admit it? Hell no! We're never wrong--it's always the other guy making the mistake. Who's willing to admit they've made a mess of their life because they ignored taking good advice. Stavros, how about you? Voula? Debbie?"

The class glanced at one another with puzzled looks. They didn't know what Reena was talking about. Sometimes she seemed



to be talking to herself and they knew it was best to wait it out, to stay quiet and to avoid her gaze.

"Oh, come on now!" Reena said bitterly. "No one has anything to say?" She pointed a finger towards the back of the room. She would show John Vavaris that it was best not to play games with her.

"What about you, Vavaris? You should know something about all this."

Vavaris realized what Reena was doing. Realizing that she was mocking him. The others might not know what the hell she meant about crumbling empires and stubbornness, but he knew, and Reena was aware he knew. For a moment he almost let it pass, almost ignored it, but he was still angry that she had refused him the money, and he wasn't about to put up with any more of her abuse--especially in front of the other kids.

"Why don't you knock off?" he said sharply in response.

"What did you say?" Reena demanded.

"I said you should knock off," Vavaris repeated loudly.

Reena's eyes sparkled with anger. "Don't you shout at me, Vavaris!" she hissed. "You're one of the people who could stand a lesson in mistakes!"

Vavaris rose out of his seat. He had come to realize that Reena lived her life without regard to any sense of morality, without allegiance to anyone or anything. Once he had admired her for her directness, but he knew now that she was far beyond

such simplicity, that she would stop at nothing to get what she wanted. He had once imagined that they were alike, that Reena was much the way he would have been if he had been born female. But Reena had no shame--and no pride. She exposed herself for all to see. He wanted no part of that. He wanted no part of her.

"Why the Christ don't you shut up!" he shouted, his face flushed with anger.

Reena lashed out. "What's the matter, Vavaris? Don't you want to tell the class about your little problem? Don't you want them to know about Karen and Ender?"

Vavaris blinked several times in surprise. He didn't think that Reena would go this far.

"Isn't it a little late to sweep things under the rug?" she taunted as she saw his look of shock and surprise. She turned towards the class. "We might just ask Mister Vavaris who started all the trouble, and now he's afraid of the consequences--afraid of what the truth might do to him--and to his friends the lesbian and the whore!"

Before Vavaris could recover from Reena's startling attack, Elena Giannopoulos had jumped to her feet. She trembled, and her eyes were filled with tears, but she could no longer hold back.

"You have no right!" Elena called out. "You have no right to say those things!"

Reena swung around to face the trembling girl. Her face,

so attractive at times, grew mottled with rage. "Shut your mouth!" she commanded.

"No--I won't," Elena answered, shaking her head. "I won't shut up! I won't let you go on spreading your lies about good people like Karen. You don't even know her--you don't know anything about her life. You don't like her and you're just trying to hurt her by spreading those awful stories. What kind of person would do that? What kind--"

"I told you to shut up, you little bitch," Reena cursed, stepping towards the spot where Elena stood beside her desk.

"--of person can throw stones at another when their own life is so--"

Reena had reached the girl's desk. Her hand leapt out and struck hard across Elena's cheek as she spoke.

Elena stepped back under the force of the blow and brought her shaking fingers to her face to touch the reddening imprint left by Reena's hand. Her eyes brimmed with tears, but she spoke again, her voice catching in her throat, as she finished what she had begun. "--when their own life is so open to question."

Reena, although enraged, was shaken by the girl's calm reaction. "Get out of my class!" she cried in a desperate voice. "Get out! Get out!"

Elena's protest, so unexpected, had brought Reena back to reality. She was not just fighting with Vavaris. There were others here, and they had seen her lose control. Now it looked

as though she had been lying--making up the whole thing!

She began to tremble and covered her face with her hands. Elena watched her for a moment, then her eyes dropped to the floor and she turned quietly and left the classroom.

Someone else in the class rose from his seat and followed. Then another. And another. One by one the students in Reena's class silently left the room.

As the last of them passed out the door, Reena's hands fell away from her face. "Where are you going?" she asked in a small voice that no one heard. Her eyes swept across the empty classroom. Only John Vavaris remained. He stood by the desk.

"John--"

"You see what you've got yourself?" he said, cutting her off sharply. "An empty classroom. No one wanted to hear you tear people apart. They know what you are Reena. They know what you are, and they don't like it. You aren't fooling anyone anymore."

"And you?" Reena choked out, her voice cracking as she tried to regain her anger and her self-control. "Are you any better than me?" Are you so damn righteous?"

"What I am doesn't matter," Vavaris taunted. "You're the one who has lost everything. And you know what? It's exactly what you deserve."

Once again tears crowded Reena's eyes. "I didn't mean it, John," she wailed. "I didn't mean it to happen like this!"

Vavaris shook his head. "It's too late now, baby. You've

really done it this time." He tapped his head sharply with his forefinger.

"You bastard!" Reena sobbed, the tears flowing freely.

"Forget it, baby," Vavaris scoffed. "You've lost your cool. There's nobody on your side anymore." Laughing, he strode past her as she wept, and left the empty classroom.

Chapter nine:

Stephen Chambers and Christina Arianakis sat together in the teachers' staffroom. The room was littered and disarrayed, bruised by the effects of a day's activity. The night janitor had not yet arrived to straighten up.

Chambers had asked Christina to stay. They were both aware that their relationship had undergone a subtle but important change in the weeks since Christmas, but they had not discussed it. Now, Chambers felt that they should.

They sat on a couch by the curtained window. The others had all left and the room was deserted. Both knew why they were there, yet they were hesitant to begin, building up to it with school news and gossip.

"Did you hear anything about what went on in Reena's history class this afternoon?" Chambers said conversationally.

"I heard she hit someone--" Christina replied. "Or that someone hit her--I'm not sure. And I heard that the class walked out on her. Do you know anything?"

"No more than that," Chambers shrugged. "No one I've talked to seems to have the whole story. Elena Giannopoulos is working on the school paper today, and I'll be going up to see her later. She was in that class today. Maybe she knows something."

"I really wouldn't be surprised at anything Reena does anymore," Christina added. "She's been acting very strange lately."

"What do you mean lately?" Chambers exclaimed, "She's been strange for as long as we've known her."

"Yes, I know," Christina explained. "But that's not exactly what I meant. I just feel that she's—I don't know—more jumpy and nervous than she used to be. It's as if she was part of a very strange atmosphere that seems to have hold of the school right now."

"What do you mean?" Chambers asked, puzzled.

"Well, it's as if a lot of things are going on that we aren't aware of. A lot of undercurrents and secrets and things. Like Bobby Bower being beaten up. And Karen Hudak looking so tired and depressed lately. I just don't know. I don't know what to make of it."

Chambers shrugged. "I guess I haven't really noticed," he confessed. "Except—now that you mention it—old man Griffen has been in a foul mood for the last few days. Maybe that has something to do with how people are acting?"

"Maybe," Christina conceded. "Or maybe it's just that time of the year when these last few horrible weeks of winter get to everybody."

"Who knows?" Chambers shrugged again. "Could the winter dregs be affecting them all? It had been bad lately. Periodic snow made worse by long, dark, windswept days."

"Look at you," Christina went on. "You haven't exactly been the friendliest person in town."

"No--I guess I haven't," Chambers murmured.

"Any--particular reason?" Christina asked hesitantly.

Chambers lifted his hands, palm up, and shook his head. He had wanted to talk, but now--.

Christina wouldn't let it go at that. "Does it have anything to do with you and me--with us?"

"Some of it--I guess," Chambers admitted.

"Have you--have you been thinking about our relationship? About what's happened to us in the last few weeks?"

Chambers hesitated. Things had happened, and he knew it wasn't the same any more. It was time for their relationship to change its direction--change while they were still friends, before they began to hurt one another. He hated the pain at times like this. Hated the slow ache he always felt when something good came to an end.

"Yes," he said at last.

Christina touched his hand softly with her own. "Stephen," she said in a low voice. "Before you go on--let me say what I have to say first. You see, Stephen, I know I care for you. I care for you very much--enough to have slept with you and enjoyed it. You've been good for me. Somehow, because of the kind of person you are, you give me--something--I don't know--excitement perhaps. The kind of excitement I've often thought about, but was never able to generate on my own. I--I don't know if I'm making myself clear, but I'm trying to say I find you attractive



and challenging. You make life a game of chance instead of a listed program of events--and I could love you for that. But love or no love--it wouldn't be enough. It wouldn't work for us. I know that, and I think you know it too. Maybe I would get tired of the gamble--get too scared of losing--or maybe you would get tired of me because I could never play in your league--never be as good as you are at that kind of game. But sooner or later the odds would beat us both, and I'd be asked to leave the casino without even the shirt on my back. I'm not strong enough for that, Stephen. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Chambers looked at her without answering.

"You see," she went on. "I've been doing a lot of thinking these last few weeks. I've been meaning to sit down and have a talk with you for a while now, but I always found a reason to put it off."

"I know what you mean," Chambers acknowledged with a small tight smile.

"And what I wanted to say," Christina continued, "is that I've finally come to a decision." She stopped and sighed deeply, her eyes sweeping the staffroom floor. "Nick called--from Vancouver. He asked me to marry him again--and I've decided to accept. We're setting a date for the summer."

Chambers was surprised, but not startled. He felt a warm rush of affection for the woman beside him. In a sense, he was proud of her. She had straightened out her life, made her

decision, given herself that solid perspective he had begun to want so badly for himself.

"What can I say?" he asked her, his head shaking briefly as he spoke. "You're right of course. And I'm happy for you. I guess I would have tried to say the same thing if you hadn't beaten me to it."

"Then we're still friends?" Christina asked with a smile.

"Forever," Chambers said gently, leaning over to kiss her cheek in much the same way he had kissed her on the eve of their very first date.

That same afternoon, Elena Giannopoulos was working in the second floor office of the school newspaper. Chambers had told her earlier that he would be busy for a short while after school, but that he would join her as soon as he possibly could.

Elena was busily typing a story on the last student council meeting when the door to the office opened and closed behind her. Thinking it was Stephen Chambers she called out a greeting but didn't lift her eyes from her work.

When the greeting went unanswered, she glanced curiously back over her shoulder. John Vavaris was leaning casually against the varnished wooden door.

"Oh--hi," Elena said in surprise. "I didn't know who had come in."

Vavaris stayed where he was, leaning back against the door.

He made no sign that he had heard Elena speak to him.

She swung around in her chair to see him more clearly.

"Are you looking for someone?" she asked politely.

"You," Vavaris answered slowly. "I'm looking for you."

Elena smiled. "Here I am," she shrugged.

Vavaris pushed himself off the door and walked towards her. As he approached, Elena saw that the pupils of his eyes seemed large and unfocused.

"You smoke?" he asked, as he neared Elena's chair. "I was downstairs in the john--smoking some good stuff--and somebody said you worked up here after school. I thought you might want some company." As he talked he held out a thin, tightly rolled cigarette, offering it to Elena.

"No--thank you," Elena refused him. She saw the cigarette was marijuana not tobacco, and she knew now why Vavaris' eyes were clouded.

"C'mon. Try it," he insisted. "Loosen you up."

Elena remained diplomatic. "No--really. I've got work I have to get finished."

"Work! Work! Work!" Vavaris complained. "That's the problem with you, girl--you work too much. You're a good lookin' chick. You should enjoy yourself more. Have a little fun once in a while."

"I'm happy the way I am," Elena shrugged, gently defending herself.

"You could be happier," Vavaris insisted, weaving a finger unsteadily before her nose. "You got a lot going for you, all you gotta do is learn how to use it. You started to show your stuff today in Kellner's class. I really dug the way you stood up to the fuckin' old bag. She almost shit a brick!"

"I just felt that someone had to speak up," Elena explained. "I really didn't enjoy doing it, but Miss Kellner was being cruel."

"Miss Kellner!" Vavaris chortled. "You don't know anything about Miss Kellner. If she doesn't like someone she'd just as soon kill them as look at them, and I think after today you aren't going to be among her favorites. She almost died when the whole friggin' class walked out on her. Whooooee!"

"What do you think she'll do?" Elena asked anxiously. She had been upset all afternoon imagining what would now happen to her grade in history. John was right about Miss Kellner's attitude towards students she disliked--their lives were made miserable.

"She'll be out to get you--you can count on that," Vavaris said with certainty. "Unless--ahhh--unless I can help you out," he added.

Elena's face framed a question. "What can you do?" she asked curiously.

"I can keep Kellner off your back, that's what I can do," he said confidently.

"I don't think anyone could do that after today," Elena responded.

Believe me--I can do it," Vavaris insisted. Then he added slowly, "If I want to."

"Oh, I see," Elena said, her suspicion growing.

"All you have to do is be friendly," the boy said, moving his face closer to hers. "I'm a friendly guy, and I like other people to be friendly too."

"Well--thanks anyway," Elena said, pulling away from his approaching face. "But I think I had better handle it my own way."

"Look here doll," Vavaris said, reaching out one hand to stroke Elena's dark hair. "We should get to know each other. We could have some good times."

"No--I don't think so," Elena protested, removing the hand that touched her.

"A lot of people think you're pretty terrific," Vavaris continued, ignoring her attempts to prevent him from stroking her. "Now I can see why. So just relax and enjoy it like a good girl." Quickly he leaned over and gripped Elena's face between his hands. His head dipped and he kissed her fiercely, his lips crushing against her own.

Elena pushed hard against his chest, throwing him backwards as she jumped up from her chair. "Don't," she protested. "Leave me alone!"

"Come one now, you know you want it," Vavaris said hoarsely. "Girls like you always do." He grabbed the chair that separated

them, knocking it to the floor.

"No! Please!" Elena pleaded. She was frightened and confused. This had never happened before. What was she supposed to do?

Vavaris wrapped his arms around her and tried to kiss her while she struggled, her head twisting from side to side to avoid his mouth.

In desperation she kicked out at his shin with a hard leather shoe. Vavaris gasped in pain. "Goddamn you!" he shouted. "I'll teach you to kick." He twisted her roughly and pushed her to the floor.

Before she could move, Vavaris was above her, then on top of her, his body pressing down on hers, his hands grasping her wrists and pinning her, his face looming closer until his mouth was on her own and the breath squeezed out of her.

She began to scream, but it was muffled by his hand as he clamped it across her face. She struck out with her own free hand, hammering futilely at his back and shoulders while he laughed at her. He was just too strong.

Elena closed her eyes. If she continued to fight she might get hurt. If she stopped, he might remove his hand from her mouth, and she could scream. She let herself go, forcing herself to relax, to wait for the right moment.

"That's much better, baby," Vavaris gasped through his breath. "I knew you'd want it." He reared back, kneeling above her, one leg on each side of her hips. His hand reached for the

zipper of his jeans and what lay beneath it.

As his hand left her mouth Elena began to scream, and at the same time she heard the sharp crack of a heavy blow. Vavaris toppled forward and fell across her. His body muffled her cry, and before she could roll out from under him she heard the office door slam shut.

Vavaris lay limply on the floor. His eyes were closed and he was unconscious. Elena didn't try to think. Her heart pounding she struggled to her feet, fled the newspaper office and raced down the stairs towards the staffroom. As she turned the bend in the stairs she collided with someone coming up. In fear she began to scream again.

"Elena! What's wrong?" a voice said, as strong hands gripped her. She looked into Stephen Chambers worried eyes. He had been on his way to meet her.

"Oh Stephen," Elena sobbed breaking into tears.

Chambers let her cry, holding her gently in his arms. When the sobs had reduced themselves to a quiet whimper, he lifted her face with his hands. "Now tell me what happened," he said.

Elena pointed up the stairs. "Upstairs--in the Viewpoint office. John Vavaris, he--" Elena began, the words rushing out all at once.

"Whoa, there," Chambers cautioned. "Slow down a bit. You're okay now."

Elena began again, breathing deeply, calming herself. "I

was in the office--waiting for you. John Vavaris came in. He was high on something. He--he attacked me. We were on the floor. I couldn't get away. But then something happened, I'm not sure-- I couldn't see. John fell over on top of me--unconscious. I think someone hit him. I heard the door slam and no one was there when I pushed him off."

"Is Vavaris still up there?" Chambers asked.

Elena nodded. "He was lying on the floor. I guess I panicked. I ran out to find you."

"Let's go and see what Vavaris has to say. He's really done it this time. He won't be pulling another stunt like this, I'll tell you that much!"

They walked up the stairs together and approached the Viewpoint office. The door was wide open. They looked inside. No one was there. The room and the hall were deserted.

"He must have come to and run away," Elena said anxiously.

"Don't worry," Stephen assured her. "He won't get away with it. We'll catch up with him tomorrow."



Chapter Ten:

Since Christmas, Bobby Bower had worked part-time in the large Handyman Hardware store on Saint Antoine Street. He worked Thursday and Friday evenings from five until nine, and all day on Saturday. Once or twice he had missed a day, but for the most part Bobby was diligent and conscientious. He had remained apart from the other clerks in the sporting goods department, and they in turn had shrugged their shoulders and let him go his own way. They were not unfriendly fellows, these men who worked the busy hardware store, and when they found that Bobby sometimes had difficulty dealing with customers who spoke only in French, growing tongue-tied and embarrassed when they conversed with him in the clipped and rapid joual of the street, they arranged to have him handle many of the small, simple chores that didn't involve working with people. His boss, Joe Lavielle, the assistant floor manager, gave Bobby his own key to the display cases, and it was Bobby's task to wash and wipe the glass each week, and to keep the displays free of dust.

The men saw Bobby as a quiet, lonely fellow who worked hard and had little to say to anyone. He could not be called unfriendly or aloof, always having a brief smile and a quick hello for everyone, but he often seemed single-minded and preoccupied. His favorite job, it seemed, was to clear the display cases and dust and polish the knives, the rifles, and the boxes of ammunition.

The men would nod and gesture to one another as they watched him, his eyes glistening and his lips moving silently as he daydreamed while he worked.

Bobby felt good about his job in the hardware store. No one teased him or made fun of him. They didn't bother him when he wanted to be quiet and left alone. It wasn't like Parkview where people pretended to be friendly, where people hurt one another. It wasn't like that at all. Only Parkview was like that. And he knew what to do about it!

One Thursday night in early spring, Joe Laveille stood by the main door of the store and glanced impatiently at his watch. It was the one part of his job as assistant floor manager that Joe openly disliked. He had to stand by the door until the last of the customers and employees had left for the night and then lock up. It meant that he was always the last to leave, and it annoyed him that some people took so long to clear out. By the time he got home the evening was gone and his wife was ready for bed.

He paced back and forth beside the door until the store had emptied. Then, quickly, he adjusted the lights, leaving those that burned through the night, and hurried to the employee locker room to pick up his hat and coat.

The shortest path from the main door to the locker room lay through the sporting goods department. Joe was almost at the door when his eye caught the rifle display case, an upright glass enclosure that lined one wall near the door to the stockroom.

He turned away, then glanced again at the display case. Something was wrong. He wasn't certain what it was, but something was not right. Although he was in a hurry to leave, he found himself staring at the glass enclosure. His forehead wrinkled in concentration. What was wrong? What had caught his attention? Then he knew. One of the rifles was missing.

Joe scratched his head. He was sure that a rifle had not been sold that day. It wasn't the season for rifles, and although they kept a display the year round, sales in late winter and early spring were few and far between. If a gun had been sold he would certainly have learned of it.

But then--where had it gone? The display case was always locked. He had a key, of course. And Pierre Juneau of the sporting goods department--and the boy--Bobby--who cleaned the cases. Perhaps the boy had sold a gun, and being new had not bothered to mention it. Lavielle sighed in relief. Yes, that was what must have happened. He would check the sales receipts and he would see that the boy had sold a gun. But not tonight. It was late. There would be time enough in the morning.

John Vavaris lifted the ball and watched its high, arching flight as it soared towards the basket. With a reverberating clatter the ball hit the rim of the hoop and bounced across the gym.

Vavaris swore lightly under his breath and dropped to his

back on the varnished hardwood floor. A few dozen quick sit-ups and his morning workout would be finished.

Since Christmas he had been coming into school before homeroom to exercise in the gymnasium. Mr. Humchack, the gym teacher, had felt it was a good idea and had given him a key to the shower room and a basketball to keep in his locker.

He had arrived a little late this morning because the night before he had decided not to come to school at all. After the scene with Elena Giannopoulos in the Viewpoint office, he had thought of lying low for a while. But this morning, arguing with himself, he had changed his mind. If he lay low, it would make him appear all the more guilty. It was better just to go on as usual. That way he could deny everything. What proof did they have anyway? It was his word against hers.

As he finished his situps, small grunts of effort escaping his lips, Vavaris again recalled the events of the previous afternoon.

He had been stoned. A few of the guys had been smoking in the small, out-of-the-way bathroom down by the basement cafeteria, and he had been having a good laugh telling them how Kellner's class had walked out on her after she had hit Elena. Then someone had mentioned that Elena worked in the Viewpoint office every day after school, and he had decided to pay her a little visit.

He had been surprised by Elena that afternoon. Surprised

and impressed. She had really told Reena off, and she had led the walkout. He had never really noticed how cute she was before that. Her outburst had made her seem far less cold and aloof than he had always considered her.

He had left his friends to their marijuana and made his way upstairs, pleased to find the school quiet and deserted. He wanted to talk to Elena alone, to tell her how much she had grown in his estimation. Who could tell--perhaps she wasn't as pure-in-heart as she seemed?

As he climbed the stairs Vavaris realized he was more stoned than he had thought. The stairs seemed to wobble as he stepped on them and his vision was a little blurred. Still, he felt strong and confident. He could hardly contain his feeling of strength and confidence.

As he approached the door to the Viewpoint office, he heard the steady click of the typewriter and smiled to himself. Elena was still there. Cautiously he tried the door and opening it peered around the room. He didn't want to walk in and find Chambers or another teacher lurking in a corner.

Elena was alone. He moved inside, the door closing behind him, and leaned back against the wooden frame.

Elena called out a hello as she heard the door close, but didn't take her eyes off her typing. He smiled again but didn't answer. He wanted to see the surprise on her face when she turned around.

If she was surprised when she saw him, she didn't show it. Her greeting was puzzled but friendly, and there was a small smile on her mouth.

Then he had told her that he had been looking for her and offered her a joint. Maybe that had been the wrong thing to do--sort of got them off on the wrong foot. He had tried to make her feel good about Kellner and the class walkout, but all she could do was worry that Kellner would give her a failing grade in history. He had tried to explain that he could fix things up for her, that he had the goods on Kellner and that he could protect her. All he wanted in return was for her to be a little more friendly, to get off her frigging high horse and join the rest of the mortals. But she had flown off the handle--started pushing him. What was he supposed to do with a hysterical broad kicking and screaming? He had just wanted to quiet her down and give him a chance to explain. He wouldn't have hurt her for God's sake!

Then suddenly his whole head had exploded in a bright flash, and the world went black.

When he woke up--he had no idea how long he had been unconscious--Elena was gone and the office was empty. His head was pounding and he stumbled trying to get up on his feet, but he knew that Elena might have run for help and that it would be best to disappear in a hurry.

He had scurried down the hall and out of the school through

a side door wondering all the time what could have hit him. It hadn't been Elena. Her small punches had been harmless. But something--or someone--had really clobbered him. That might mean Elena had a witness, someone who had seen them struggling in the office. But they wouldn't dare speak out against him. The school had gotten the message the day ~~he~~ he had beaten up Bobby Bower. If anyone opened their mouth they were as good as dead. No one had squealed on him then, and they wouldn't do it now....

Vavaris finished the last of his sit-ups and gasped for breath. The sweat ran freely beneath his t-shirt and his body felt relaxed from the exertion. He jumped up from the floor and jogged loosely towards the door of the locker room. He picked up his towel from the bench where he had placed it earlier, and removed the key that was carefully wrapped inside its folds. He still had time for a hot shower and a cup of coffee at Nicko's restaurant before school started.

Vavaris opened the door of the locker room and stepping into the darkness turned on the light switch by the door. The locker room wasn't large by any standards and as it was the school's only shower facility, was alternately shared by the boys' and girls' gym classes. Despite its size, the room did look better for its recent renovation, one of the few improvements Parkview had seen in the last few years. Now, at least, it contained a new sink and toilet, and a row of larger lockers that had been installed along the back wall. These larger

lockers had been designed for the school teams, and Mr. Humchack had assigned one to each of the varsity athletes.

Vavaris dialed the combination on his lock, took out his soap and shampoo and settled under the hot, steamy water of the shower. He whistled and sang while he scrubbed himself, enjoying the soothing effects of the warm spray against his skin.

Suddenly, without warning, the lights in the locker room went out and the room was plunged into darkness.

"Heeey, malaka!" Vavaris swore in Greek. He couldn't see a thing. Goddamn school. Nothing worked right. Slowly he made his way out of the shower and along the aisle between the lockers towards the door. He held one hand out in front of him while the other pressed against the lockers to guide him. He swore again as he barked a wet shin against the hard edge of a wooden bench.

For a moment he thought he heard a noise behind him, the pad of footsteps, but the water still hissed loudly in the shower and he wasn't sure.

"Who's there?" he spoke gruffly, his ears straining for another sound. There was no answer and his shoulders shrugged in the darkness. Why the hell was he getting spooked just because the lights were out. He knew he was alone because he had used his key to get in. The showers had been locked as usual, and he had been the only one in the gym.

Then he heard the rush behind him, the sound of clothing



rustled by sudden movement. He gasped in fear, whirling to face the unseen menace behind him.

The blow of the heavy club struck him on the top of the shoulder, and the pain sent him crashing to his knees in shock and bewilderment. A second blow followed the first, glancing against the side of his head and pitching him against the cold metal lockers. Desperately he reached out to grab his assailant, his hand finding and gripping the shirt of his attacker. But he could do no more. There, on his knees, his shoulder broken and his head filled with piercing pain, he was almost helpless. Another heavy blow slammed against his skull and he screamed, aware now of the numbness growing in his fingers. With a final effort he tore at the clothes of the dark, invisible body that loomed above him, but his strength was gone. The club struck freely now, again and again, and a final searing flash of pain was the last thing John Vavaris ever felt as his skull cracked in an open wound and his blood and his brain spilled out along the floor.

A few minutes later the door of the locker room opened slightly from the inside, and a pale face appeared in the crack it made. Two eyes carefully roamed the length of the gymnasium, seeing that it was still empty. Then a cautious figure stepped out into the gym. Quietly the locker room door was closed, a hand checking the doorknob to be certain it was locked. Then, looking back over his shoulder and gripping tightly the black

guitar case he held in his hand, Bobby Bower walked hurriedly to the gymnasium exit and disappeared into the basement hall.

At 8:20 that same morning, shortly after Bobby Bower left the gymnasium in Parkview High, Joe Lavaille arrived for work at the Handyman Hardware store.

For a short while the previous evening, Joe had forgotten the fact that a rifle was missing from the gunrack of the sports department. He didn't want to deal with workday problems on his own time. But as he had lain in the darkness beside his sleeping wife, the matter of the missing gun had once again come to mind and begun to plague him. Had the new boy--Bobby--really sold a gun--or had he stolen one? He remembered that the boy had left the store a little early, an unusual occurrence because Bobby never seemed to be in a hurry to get home and had always before been one of the very last to leave.

And another strange thing was that Bobby had been carrying a guitar case when he left. Why had he brought it in the first place? The others had asked him to sing for them, but Bobby had refused and walked away. It just didn't make sense.

When Joe awakened several minutes before his morning alarm, the matter of the gun, like the leftover fragments of a bad dream, was still on his mind.

He dressed quickly, leaving the house without breakfast before his wife had even roused herself from the warm covers of

their bed. But why would the boy steal the gun, Lavielle wondered to himself. The loss was too evident, too easy to notice. He must know he could never get away with it.

Arriving at the store, Joe quickly made his way to the office on the second floor and hurriedly checked the sports department receipts. He checked them twice. A gun had not been sold the previous day.

Anxious now, he walked purposefully to the gun rack from which the rifle had been taken. There were boxes of bullets on display with the rifles, but as a precaution the boxes used were empty, and Joe was not surprised to see that they had not been touched.

He made his way to the stockroom. The bullets were kept on the shelves in stock. As he stretched to pull down a box from the upper shelf, his toe banged against something hidden on the floor. It made a hollow, humming sound, and Joe bent curiously to investigate.

Reaching his hand beneath the bottom shelf, his thick fingers clasped a long wooden neck and he slowly pulled it out in the open. It was a guitar. Bobby's guitar! And suddenly Joe began to understand. Now he knew why Bobby had brought the guitar to work, and how the gun had been stolen beneath his eyes.

Again he reached for the cardboard box on the higher shelf. There were four dozen boxes of bullets in each large container. The first container rattled when he moved it. Joe looked inside

and nodded briskly when he saw that four boxes of bullets had been removed. Bobby was fully armed.

Quickly, Joe returned to the upstairs office and searched the employee file for Bobby's home address. With the form in his hand he went to the telephone on the secretary's desk and dialed the police. His watch read 8:40 a.m. The police would have to pay Bobby Bower an early morning visit.

Chapter eleven:

As the homeroom bell rang, Robert Petersen glanced up from the papers scattered across his desk and from habit looked at the clock on the wall of his office. 8:40 a.m. His eyes moved to the window and he bent his head slightly to catch a better glimpse of the sky. The day was dull and grey, the sky overcast. There was a damp chill in the air outside, and the smell of snow. The weatherman had predicted a warm, clear weekend, the first hint of spring's eventual arrival, but Petersen bet against it. They would have snow before nighfall.

The telephone on his desk buzzed suddenly, and Petersen pressed the intercom button as he lifted the receiver. "Yes, Mrs. Sealson?"

"I have a call for you on line one--a Mrs. Megerian. She says she's Karen Hudak's aunt."

Petersen pressed the line one button and greeted his caller in a bright, early-morning voice. He listened for a few moments and the tone of his voice changed, shifting to one of solemnity. "I see. I'm very sorry to hear that. Yes--yes. I understand. If there is anything at all we can--yes, of course. Please let us know. Yes. Goodbye Mrs. Megerian."

The woman had called to inform the school that Karen's mother--Mrs. Hudak--had passed away the previous day, and that Karen was resting in the hospital recovering from shock.

Petersen felt a genuine brush of sorrow. Mrs. Hudak was a stranger to him, he had never met her or talked to her, and yet her death was his concern and had touched his life. He and Mr. Griffen would attend the funeral when Mrs. Megerian called again to inform them of the arrangements. And perhaps, if she was well enough, they would drop by to visit Karen in the hospital.

Poor girl. Her records showed that her father was dead and that she lived alone with her mother. Now she had no one. She hadn't even finished high school and both her parents were gone.

Petersen wondered if Karen would live with her relatives-- with the Mrs. Megerian who had called on the phone. He knew that Karen was a bright young lady, but some of her teachers had complained that she was being ruined by her relationship with John Vavaris. He wondered how the affair with John had affected her life at home, and wondered again if the relationship would continue now that her mother had died. Perhaps Karen would marry Vavaris and disappear into that sad, faceless group of women who suffer at the hands of their husbands.

Petersen leaned back in his chair, his eyes glazed in abstraction. It was strange, he thought, how different people were attracted to one another. What made a girl like Karen fall in love with a John Vavaris? What twist of chemistry and emotion made that happen time and time again? Who could explain the

human heart? Love came and flourished and died without much understanding. Each age had its own heroes to worship. Each individual found his own definition of love.

John Vavaris was a hero in Parkview High. Next year--or even tomorrow--he might be laughed at as a fool. But today he was king of the hill. It was funny how times changed. In the past, academics and sportmanship were the qualities of greatness in the high school. Now, students look to the rebels--the iconoclasts--students who refute authority in any guise and on any pretext. It didn't matter if the protesters were right or wrong, it only mattered that they stood up and shouted their slogans and their clichés loud enough to be heard.

So people like John Vavaris became heroes, and girls like Karen Hudak lost their hearts to them.

Petersen shrugged. The world was a strange place at the best of times. And times like these were far from the best.

His eyes fell on the open appointment book on his desk. He had written a note reminding himself to see Pat Ender. He had contacted the Teachers' Association and learned that they would support any union member whose dismissal was based solely on their sexual bias. He hoped Pat would find the news encouraging. The affair was far from over, and bound to get worse.

Petersen's thoughts were suddenly interrupted by noise and confusion in the outer office, followed by a rapid banging at his door. Before he could even respond, the door burst open to reveal

a breathless Mrs. Lipton, the red-headed female phys. ed. instructor with the North London accent. She began to shout at Petersen in a loud, unintelligible voice, her face flushed and pink with excitement and confusion.

"Whoa there--" Petersen requested. "I didn't catch a word you said."

Peggy Lipton clutched her throat and gasped for breath. Her face worked furiously as she struggled to calm herself. "Downstairs--in the locker room--he's dead!" she stammered.

"What are you talking about?" Petersen demanded, rising out of his chair and grasping the woman by her shoulder. "Who's downstairs? What do you mean?"

The gym teacher began again. "My girls' class--first period. I sent them to change in the locker room. One of them screamed and I ran in. There was a body--a dead body--half stuffed in one of the lockers. There was blood everywhere. The girls are hysterical."

There was shock on Petersen's face. "Dead? You're certain? Who is it--a student?"

Peggy Lipton nodded. "Yes," she said, "Charlie was in the office and came running when he heard the screaming. He checked and saw that the boy was dead--his skull had been crushed. I left Charlie with the girls and ran up to get you."

"Who is it?" Petersen heard himself demand.

"Vavaris," Peggy stammered, "John Vavaris!"



Petersen pushed past her and out of the office, ignoring the curious stares of the secretaries who had gathered by the door. Peggy Lipton followed closely behind him.

They rushed down the stairs to the basement, and ran quickly to the door of the gymnasium. Inside, a group of grade eight girls sat huddled against the far wall. Most of them were crying.

Charlie Humchack, who had been trying to calm them, hurried over to Petersen and Mrs. Lipton as they came into the gym.

"Peggy, watch the girls, will you?" he said to the woman as he took Petersen by the elbow and guided him into the locker room. "It's John Vavaris," he told the vice-principal. "It isn't a pretty sight. His head is bashed in, and it was no accident."

The body lay stretched out on the floor. The face--or what had been a face, was smashed and broken. There was blood everywhere, spread out beneath the battered head like a dark, liquid halo.

Petersen closed his eyes at the sight of it. "You're sure this is John Vavaris?" he asked grimly.

"It's Vavaris, alright," the gym teacher answered. "Hard to recognize like that, but I knew the boy pretty well. Jesus Christ! Who would do a thing like that?"

The facts began to settle in Petersen's mind. A boy had been killed--had been murdered--right in the school. Police

would have to be involved. Parkview would be turned upside down.

He turned to Charlie Humchack. "Okay," he said with resignation. "Not much we can do here. Not much we can do for poor Vavaris now. Charlie, you go up to the office and call the police. I've got to figure out a way to quietly clear the school. I don't want the kids going into a panic when word of this gets out. The best thing would be to empty the school until the police decide what they want to do."

"What'll I tell them?" Humchack asked.

"Tell them what happened. Tell them someone has been killed."

Humchack left the locker room and Petersen pondered his next move. He looked down at the body of Parkview's star athlete. My God, what happens now? he thought. And what has already happened?

He felt a wave of revulsion and pulled his eyes away from the body of the dead boy. He had to clear the school--that was it. He had to get the kids away before the police arrived or bedlam would break loose. The school would be closed anyway. The police couldn't hold an investigation with classes in session.

He stepped out into the gym and called Peggy Lipton who was still comforting the frightened grade-eight girls who had discovered the body.

"Peggy, I'm going to dismiss the school so the police can investigate this--this tragedy--without any trouble. I'm going to ring the fire bell and assemble everyone in the basement. That's probably the best way to spread the word. When everyone is assembled we'll send them to the lockers for their coats and then clear them out. I want to lock the gym so that no one can walk in here accidentally. Oh--and Peggy," he added, waving his hand towards the group of girls still huddled against the wall. "Keep those girls in here until the school is cleared. That way the word won't spread too quickly and we won't be plagued by panic or morbid curiosity."

Leaving Peggy Lipton with the girls, Petersen walked to the small, red fire alarm just outside the gymnasium door. Almost by habit he checked his watch. It was 9:12. First period was not yet half over. The day was about to become the shortest--or perhaps the longest--of the school year.

As he reached for the hard black switch that would set off the clamor of the fire-bell, Petersen thought ironically of the students he had punished for setting off the alarm when there had been no fire. But this was no false alarm. A murder had been committed. A murder! Parents would be up in arms, and heads would roll. In the midst of tragedy all hell was about to break loose--he could feel it in his gut.

Bobby left the gym at 8:10 a.m. and walked purposefully

across the basement towards the music room in the corridor just beyond the play area. Several Chinese students were noisily engaged in a game of ping pong at one of the several tables, and other students were casually gathered in small groups about the basement, but Bobby drew no attention as he carried his guitar case down the corridor to the door of the music room.

At the door he paused, glancing slowly to his left and right. The hallway was empty and he was out of sight of the students in the game area. Fumbling with the copies of the master keys which he pulled from his back pocket, he hastily entered the dark, still room. He hesitated by the light switch then passed it by, leaving the room in shadow. He made his way past the uneven rows of metal chairs used by the music classes, and walked to the teacher's desk at the far end of the classroom. He placed the guitar case gently on the desktop and twice ran his hand across its smooth, vinyl finish. He would wait here. He knew that the music room was never used during the first period, and that no one would find him. He smiled, a broad, slashing grin that puffed his cheeks and squeezed his eyes into two dark raisins. It was going to be alright. The fear he had felt earlier, at home, before he had left for school, was gone and forgotten. He had been shaken when his mother caught him leaving the house before his step-father had crawled from bed, but she had been too fatigued and too much in pain to ask any

questions. He had stumbled across her sitting in the pre-dawn darkness of the kitchen struggling with the torment of a migraine. He had left quickly, guitar case in hand, before he roused her suspicions.

Now there was no need to worry. It was going to be alright. He was at peace.

At 8:45 a.m., while Parview High was still engaged in the morning ritual of its homeroom period, police constables Rejean Malo and Raymond Gautier double-parked their blue and white patrol car in front of a small triplex on Hutchison Street a short distance north of the school.

A few minutes earlier, while riding patrol on an overtime shift, the two men had received a radio call to investigate the theft of a rifle from a Handyman Hardware store.

"This is the place," Malo informed his blue-coated partner, pointing out the building. "Apartment two."

The constables climbed the interior stairwell of the tidy, three-family triplex. "I'll knock, you stand aside," Malo suggested. "If the guy does have the gun, he may want to use it before we take it away."

Gautier stood aside and removed his gun from its holster. This was the worst part of the job. Never knowing what to expect when they knocked at a door. Putting your life on the line.

Malo knocked and felt his muscles tense. He knocked again,

louder this time, and heard the slide of shuffling feet behind the door.

A small voice spoke. "Who is it?"

"This is the police," Malo said in his accented English. "We want to speak with you."

The door opened on a safety-chain and a thin, gray-haired woman with a pale and weary face peered out. "Yes? What is it?" she asked in a frightened voice.

"Is this the place of Bobby Bower who work for the Handyman Hardware," Gautier asked in his broken English as he scanned the notes he had made from the radio call.

"Yes. I'm his mother," the woman said anxiously, fear lighting her puffy eyes. "Tell me what's wrong? Has Bobby been hurt?"

"No, no," Gautier shrugged. "We have come to talk with him."

The woman closed the door then quickly opened it without the chain-lock. "He's not here," she said in her quaking voice. "He left for school early this morning. Please tell me what's wrong. What has he done?"

We just make investigation," Gautier said as casually as he could. He didn't want the old woman alarmed. "It is for the store where he work."

"What school he go?" Malo asked quickly, taking out a pad and pencil.

"Parkview--Parkview High," the woman answered nervously.

"Just down--just down the street."

"Merci beaucoup," Gautier said politely, touching his cap with a forefinger.

The two men turned to go, but Gautier suddenly swung around to face the puzzled woman once again. "Excusez-moi," he said, "but did you see the boy this morning?"

The woman nodded. "Yes--yes, I saw him leave. I was--I was up with a headache. He left early--before his father was up. I thought it strange he was leaving so early but--I didn't say anything about it."

Gautier glanced at his partner. "And he take something?" he asked the woman. "He carry something out?"

"Why yes," the woman answered, surprise appearing on her tired face. "I think he had his guitar with him. Yes--in fact I'm sure he did. It was in the black case. He had the black case with him. I wondered why he was taking it because he hasn't touched his guitar in months."

Gautier nodded and the two constables turned and quickly moved down the stairs.

"We better get down to the school right away," Gautier said in French as the two men climbed into the squad car. "If the kid took the gun, there may be trouble. He might just want to show his friends how it works."

The red blinker of the patrol car flashed on, and the car sped off in the direction of Parkview High.

Bobby Bower sat in the dim light of the empty music room and listened to the different sounds of the school. The low murmur of student voices grew to a solid wave of noise as more kids arrived and gathered in the basement. Bobby could hear shouts and laughter, the clang of locker doors, and the sound of feet as they passed in the corridor beyond.

When the first bell sounded the call to homeroom, Bobby looked at the classroom clock. 8:30. Students would be in their homerooms until the first period began at 8:55.

Slowly he reached out and opened the guitar case that lay on the table before him. He remembered now the sound of Vavaris' head as it cracked beneath the blows of the wooden club. When Vavaris had fallen to his knees and then slumped noiselessly to the tile floor, he had continued to strike, losing the body in the darkness of the locker room, and just lashing out--banging and banging until his arm grew tired and his breath came in loud, ragged gasps.

Vavaris was dead--he was sure of it. It had been easy. He had known that Vavaris came early each morning to work out in the gym. Today he had made sure that he would arrive first, and using the master key had hidden in the locker room. He had waited impatiently while Vavaris played in the gym, and had hidden carefully behind the lockers near the lightswitch when Vavaris came in for his shower. The rest had been simple. Vavaris was quicker and stronger, but even he didn't have a



chance against the darkness and a heavy wooden club.

Thunk! Thunk! Thunk! Hit and hit and hit! Vavaris would never touch anyone again. Would never hurt anyone again. Never!

Bobby looked inside the guitar case. The stolen rifle was there, loaded and ready. How often he had held and polished this gun before, and now it was his, it belonged to him and did what he told it to do. He had explained everything, and the gun understood and agreed. They would do what they had to do together. Softly he stroked the wooden stock. His fingers closed firmly about the grey metal barrel as he stroked it.

There were other things in the battered guitar case, and each of these Bobby touched in turn. There were boxes of bullets, a kitchen knife and a long hunk of brown twine he had wrapped in a tight ball. There was the pair of tin handcuffs he had bought in a toystore, the blood-damp wooden club now spotted with bits of hair and skin, and in a paper bag sealed with transparent tape, the squat form of his pet toad Hermie.

"Soon, Hermie," the boy said, touching the bag with his fingers. "Very, very soon."

The bell clattered sharply to sound the end of homeroom, and Bobby quickly closed the vinyl case. It was first period. It was time to begin.

He rose from his seat just as a key turned in the door to the music room. Bobby caught his breath. He began to reach inside the guitar case then stopped and waited silently as

Mr. Bushnell, Parkview's music teacher, entered his classroom.

At first Bill Bushnell didn't notice Bobby standing at the desk in the back of the classroom. He switched on the light and walked directly to the metal file cabinets stacked by the windows. Opening the file, he began to search through the reams of paper.

The music teacher was an older man, slightly built and stooping at the shoulders. His dark hair was thin and dry, and he wore thick, broad-rimmed glasses much like Bobby's own to compensate for his weakening eyesight. He had been Bobby's teacher when Bobby had futilely attempted to learn music in the ninth grade, and Bobby had always liked him. He had once taken Bobby aside and told him not to worry if other kids made fun of his thick glasses, because poor eyesight was often compensated by a good ear for music. It had not been true in Bobby's case, but the boy had never forgotten the gesture.

When he turned away from the filing cabinet, Bill Bushnell was startled by the sudden sight of Bobby standing at his desk, and dropped the armful of papers he held in his hands. He recovered quickly when he saw who it was and shook his head in small embarrassment to his nervous reaction.

"Mister Bower!" he exclaimed. "You almost gave an old man a heart attack. Just what are you doing here, anyway?"

"I--I came--" Bobby stammered, searching for an explanation. "I came for my guitar," he said at last, pointing to the vinyl

case on the desktop. "I lent it to Jimmy--in the band--and he left it here. I--I wanted to pick it up."

Bobby's throat went dry. If Mr. Bushnell didn't believe him, if he tried to stop him, Bobby would have to hurt the old man. He didn't want to--Mr. Bushnell was nice--but he couldn't be stopped now.

"Ahhh-ha, I see," the teacher nodded. The story was feasible, and because he himself was an honest man, it didn't occur to him until later that Bobby had somehow gained entrance to a locked classroom.

"Well, didn't you hear the bell?" the teacher asked. You've already missed homeroom, and now you're going to be late for first period. I think you'd better get along to class."

Bobby lifted the guitar case off the desk and followed Bill Bushnell into the hall. With a final mild admonishment, the kindly music teacher scurried off across the basement and Bobby took the stairs by the music room and made his way along the hall directly to room 127.

He knocked at the door and a door monitor answered. Bobby stuck his head into the classroom and spoke to Mrs. Mousakis, the French teacher. "Excuse me, but the office would like to see Elena Giannopoulos," he said solemnly.

Mrs. Mousakis motioned with her long, thin hand that Elena was free to go and continued with the introduction to her lesson.

Outside, Elena asked, "What does the office want with me?"

Bobby shook his head. "The office doesn't want you," he explained. "I just said that to get you out of class. It's Mr. Chambers. He asked me to come and get you."

"Where is he?" Elena asked. She was puzzled. Why did Stephen want to see her? And why did Bobby have to lie to get her out of class?

"He's in the art room," Bobby told her. "He wants to see you in the art room."

Elena lifted her eyebrows. "It certainly must be important," she said. "Mr. Chambers isn't usually this mysterious."

"It is important. It is," Bobby nodded agreement.

Elena approached the art room door and knocked. But Bobby edged by her and waved the key for her to see. "I have the key," he said without further explanation.

Elena knew that the art room wasn't used during first period, but why did Bobby have to use a key if Stephen was waiting inside?

They stepped in, Bobby carefully closing the door behind them, and Elena looked around the empty classroom.

"Where's Steph--Mr. Chambers?" she asked.

Bobby didn't answer. He placed the guitar case on the counter that ran along the wall next to the door, and reached inside for the tin handcuffs. Elena watched him with a puzzled look still on her face, and before she could react, Bobby reached for her arm and snapped the cuff around her wrist.

"Bobby! What do you think you're doing?" Elena demanded.

The fear she had felt the day before when John Vavaris had attacked her came rushing back and she began to struggle.

With one quick move Bobby spun her about and wrapped an arm around her body, pinning her own arms against her side. With his free hand he reached into the back pocket of his trousers and pulled out one of the light blue handkerchiefs he had been given at Christmas. Before Elena could call for help he jammed the handkerchief across her mouth, holding it tightly with his hand.

"Please don't fight," he begged. "I don't want to hurt you. I couldn't hurt you. I just want to explain. I just want you to listen."

Elena was too confused and too frightened to listen. She didn't understand what was happening. She lashed out in fear, kicking and struggling to free herself.

"No! No!" Bobby moaned as she struggled to remove the handkerchief. Growing frantic, he lifted her off her feet and pulled her down to the floor of the classroom. Still holding the gag against her mouth he rolled her onto her stomach, and quickly tied the handkerchief behind her head.

Elena twisted in protest, but the gag bit into her lips and turned her scream into a garbled, painful groan.

"I'm sorry, sorry, sorry," Bobby whined. "I didn't want you to cry. I didn't want to make you cry. I didn't. But you don't understand. I've got to make you understand. Then I can

let you go, I promise. Soon you'll understand and then I'll let you go and you'll be glad I did it because I did it for you and Miss Arianakis." Bobby's eyes glowed at this final confession. Now Elena knew he was there to help her and protect her. He felt his heart swell with pride. Now she would respect him.

Gently he handcuffed her hands behind her back and lifting her awkwardly in his arms carried her across the room to the Japanese screen Pat Ender used to section off small parts of the art room. There was a chair behind the screen, and Bobby placed Elena carefully on the seat. Quickly he shuffled back to the guitar case on the counter and retrieved the rope and the knife stored inside. He returned to the screen and cut off a section of twine. "I don't like to tie you, either," he whispered, "but I have to keep you here for a while--until you understand what I'm trying to do for you."

He wrapped the rope around Elena and the chair, knotting it securely. "Don't be afraid," he reassured her. "It won't be long. I'll just be gone for a minute."

He placed the screen around the chair so that Elena could not be seen from the doorway, and left the artroom. He paused outside the door. It would have to left unlocked. A nervous tension gnawed at his stomach as he fought down the temptation to lock it. While he was gone someone could come to the artroom and find Elena. He shivered slightly and clenched his fists. It was a chance he would have to take. He didn't want to arouse Chambers'

suspicious by having the key. Luckily Chambers classroom was in the same wing. He would only be gone for a few seconds.

Chambers answered when Bobby knocked excitedly at the door. "Excuse me," Bobby mumbled breathlessly. "Elena Giannopoulos-- she wants to see you. She's in the art room." He turned his eyes away from Chambers' piercing gaze.

"What's this all about?" Chambers asked sternly. He glanced at the classroom clock high on the back wall. It was 9:03. He didn't like to be interrupted when he was teaching, but Elena was an exception.

Bobby shrugged and made a face. "I dunno," he said. "She wants to tell you something."

Chambers frowned. "Okay," he said. "I'll be right there." He turned back to his class as Bobby moved down the hall. "I'll be back in one minute," he said in his most authoritarian voice. "And I don't want to hear a sound when I get back!"

He strode quickly down the hall and arrived at the art room door just as Bobby was easing it open. As he stepped in, a bamboo and paper screen toppled and fell, and Chambers saw Elena gagged and tied to a chair, her foot still in the air following its urgent kick.

"What the hell--" he began but never finished as an explosion went off inside his head and he slumped unconscious to the floor.

Elena screamed soundlessly against the gag that bound her mouth as Bobby stood motionless above the fallen Stephen Chambers

with his hand on the wooden club he had taken from the guitar case.

Bobby knew that Chambers was only unconscious. That he wasn't dead like Vavaris. He had been careful about that. He had not hit him too hard. Just enough to tie him up like Elena.

He dragged the limp body of the English teacher to the spot where Elena was tied to the chair and hurriedly bound his hands and feet with long pieces of twine.

"We'll be ready soon," he said, looking at Elena through his thick owlsh glasses. "I'll take care of Miss Kellner and bring back Miss Arianakis and we'll be ready." He looked at his watch. "Six minutes after nine. Still plenty of time before the period is over."

He gave a final tug at the knots securing Chambers' hands, and gagged him with a second handkerchief he produced from his pocket. As he stood to leave a second time, Bobby peered at the frightened girl.

"You scared me when you kicked the screen, Elena. I wish you hadn't done that. You have to believe me and trust me and it's not nice to make trouble." He shook his finger at the girl and then slowly lifted the fallen screen and placed it around his prisoners. "Please don't kick anymore, Elena," he pleaded. "It won't help and somebody might get hurt!"

Bobby walked to the guitar case and took out the polished rifle. The time had come. There was no longer a need for tricks



He had Chambers and Elena, and Kellner and Miss Arianakis were both in the staffroom during the first period. He didn't have to hide anymore.

Bobby walked towards the staffroom with his eyes straight ahead and the rifle cradled in his arm. Old Evangelos, the Greek caretaker, stood in a hallway storage room as the boy passed by. He recognized Bobby as the crazy one who made the others laugh. "Kalimahrah," the caretaker said, greeting Bobby in Greek. He noticed the gun in Bobby's arm and felt insulted as the boy passed by silently, not bothering to return his greeting. Guns, they carry now, the old man thought. What kind of school was this? He shook his head in resignation.

Bobby reached the door of the staffroom. He felt calm and detached, the same way he had felt while he waited for Vavaris to walk out of the shower in the locker room. A sentence had been passed and he was simply the executioner. It was his job and it had to be done. He gripped the rifle loosely in his left hand, and with the other he opened the staffroom door and stepped inside.

When the bell for the start of first period rang at 8:55, Christina Arianakis finished her first cup of morning coffee, washed her ceramic mug at the sink and returned it to the cupboard in the kitchen section of the staffroom. She was in a hurry to get down to the main office. There were several work

sheet stencils she had to run off for her second and third period classes, and as happened so often the staffroom stencil machine was again out of order. Like other things in Parkview, the equipment was old and cantankerous. Periodically, and without warning, the machine broke down and teachers were obliged to run off their stencils in the main office until the repairman could be brought in.

On her way out, Christina turned to Pat Ender who sat reading on a couch by the window. "Need anything from the office?" she asked. "I have to go down and run off a few stencils."

"No, nothing right now," Pat answered. "Thanks anyway."

Christina saw Reena Kellner lift her head from the papers she was correcting at the end of the table across the room from Pat. She knew that Pat and Reena were feuding, that they never spoke or looked at one another, but she didn't know any of the details. She was just thankful that she wasn't involved. She had problems of her own to concern her. Nick Galanos, her fiancée, wanted a summer wedding, and although she now willingly accepted the idea, having straightened out her affair and her feelings for Stephen Chambers, the thought of her own wedding somehow still surprised her.

"If anyone is looking for me, tell them I'm in the office," she said.

Constables Malo and Gautier parked their patrol car on Saint

Urbain Street, across from Parkview High. Patrolman Gautier climbed out of the car more slowly than his taller, thinner partner. He had put on ten extra pounds since Christmas and it had begun to show. His wife had let out his pants again, but they still squeezed tightly across his mid-section.

He glanced up at the unimposing high school on the far side of the street. It was an old school, as old as the neighbourhood perhaps, but he had never been inside. It looked more like a factory than a school. There was no grass, no playground, and even the school's name, carved in stone above the main entrance had been largely obscured by the grime and exhaust of endless traffic flowing south on Saint Urbain. Gautier was glad that he lived on the South Shore, that his own kids went to a real school with a football field and a front yard.

The two patrolmen followed the sign up the short flight of stairs from the main entrance and entered the office. They asked the startled Mrs. Sealson if she could ask Bobby Bower to come to the office.

"Yes, I can do that," the secretary replied to their inquiry. "I'll just look up his schedule in the file and have his teacher send him down."

Mrs. Sealson turned to the file cabinet by her desk and began to search through the alphabetized schedule cards.

Standing by the counter near the door, constable Malo gently jabbed his partner with an elbow and with a slight nod of his

head drew the other man's attention to the young woman working at a stencil machine. She was curvacious and pretty, and Malo, a man who liked women, smiled a knowing smile at his older, married companion.

A loud, clanging bell went off suddenly in the hall beyond the office, and Mrs. Sealson glanced irritably at the clock above her desk. Malo's eyes followed her glance. It was 9:11.

"Another fire alarm," the secretary said to Christina Arianakis who was busy running off her stencils. "I wonder who's playing with the switch this time?" She turned back to the file, resuming her hurried search for Bobby's class card.

Charlie Humchack ran from the gym to the main office to call the police as Petersen had suggested. As he ran, his mind worked alternately on two separate tracks, and his emotions changed with his thoughts in rapid succession. One moment he felt charged with shock and excitement and imagined what he would tell his wife that evening--about a murder in the school, a student's head beaten to a bloody pulp. And yet the next moment, even as he felt the urge to shout out what had happened like a town crier in a village square, he was struck by the horror of it all, and by the crawling fear that because it had happened in the gym, he might, in some way, be held responsible. He had been the one after all, who had given Vavaris a key to the locker room. The thought turned his stomach sour.

As he approached the office the fire bell sounded suddenly, and classrooms immediately began to empty as teachers moved their students to the nearest exits. Humchack threw his arms up in the air. A fire alarm! What else could possibly happen? He pulled open the door to the office and blinked in surprise. Before him, at the counter, were two uniformed policemen.

When Bobby Bower flung open the door to the staffroom, he saw four teachers seated separately around the room.

Mr. Bernot, the tall, well-dressed head of science, sat at the work table with a book and a cup of coffee. Bill Bushnell, the music teacher who had found him in the music room, now sat in a corner of the room looking over the sheets of music he had taken earlier from the metal file cabinet. Pat Ender sat reading on a couch near the window, and at the far end of the room, bent over some papers, he saw Reena Kellner.

When he saw Reena, Bobby was pleased, but a moment later his heart skipped when he realized that Christina Arianakis was not in the room with the others.

"Where's Miss Arianakis?" he shouted suddenly.

The heads of the four startled teachers shot in his direction, and they saw the rifle in his hands.

Pat Ender recovered first. "Miss Arianakis isn't here," she said quickly.

Bernot, the science teacher, rose from his seat at the table in indignation. "What are you doing with that gun?" he demanded

in his strictest teaching voice.

"You shut up!" Bobby responded, his voice loud but no longer shouting. He swung the gun up to his shoulder and pointed it at Bernot. "You tell me where she is or I'll shoot you," he warned.

The tone in Bernot's voice changed quickly. He suddenly realized he was no longer a teacher talking to an errant student, but an unarmed man staring at a lethal weapon. "I--I don't know where she is," he said quietly.

"She's in the office! She went down to the office!" a voice piped out.

Bobby swung the gun towards the sound, and the sights centered on Reena Kellner. Now he knew where Miss Arianakis was. He could go and find her. But first he would take care of Kellner.

"What--what do you want?" Reena asked in a frightened voice as Bobby continued to point the gun in her direction. "I've told you where Christina is--what do you want with us?"

"Stand up," Bobby said clearly.

Reena stood, holding the edge of the table for support, her face pale with fear.

"You've been found guilty," Bobby rasped. "You and Vavaris--both guilty."

"What are you talking about?" Reena screamed. "What guilty? Stop it! Just stop it!"

"Guilty of hurting," Bobby shouted back. "Of causing trouble. You're guilty--and you have to be punished."

The fire bell clattered suddenly in the hall, and Bobby jumped around nervously to face the staffroom door. When he realized it was only the alarm he turned back to Reena who had begun to edge back towards the archway leading to the kitchen area.

"Stay where you are," Bobby warned. "Don't move!"

"I didn't do anything to you," Reena wailed above the clamor of the alarm. "I don't even know you."

"I know you," Bobby shouted. "I know what you've done. I know! I know! You're guilty, guilty, guilty!"

Reena turned and ran for the archway as Bobby pulled the trigger of the polished rifle at his shoulder. The bullet caught the woman in the fleshy part of her upper arm, and she fell with a scream to the carpeted floor. Bobby cocked the weapon in one swift motion, and holding it against his shoulder advanced slowly on the wounded teacher.

Suddenly Pat Ender moved across the room and stood before Reena. She raised her hands in a pleading attempt to stop Bobby's slow, single-minded advance.

"No, Bobby," She protested. "You can't do this. You can't!"

Bobby stopped, lifting the gun barrel to point at Pat's chest. "I don't want to hurt you, Miss Ender," he said sincerely. "You're a nice person and I don't want to hurt you. But if you get in my way I'll have to."

"Bobby, please!" Pat pleaded. "Reena is hurt. You can't do any more to her--it isn't right!"

"She's guilty!" Bobby shouted angrily. "She has to die!"

A voice broke out loudly behind him, and Bobby whirled to face it.

It was Bill Bushnell. He was standing by his chair, and his usually calm face was shocked and angry. The sheets of music were scattered on the floor at his feet. Violently he shook his finger in Bobby's direction.

"Who do you think you are?" he said, his voice quavering. "Who gave you the right to judge Reena Kellner--or any of us? Have you gone crazy? Has the world done so much to you that you have to revenge yourself with killing? Think, Bobby! What are you doing? What has driven you to this--this indecency!"

Bill had never considered himself a brave man, and his fear generally kept him from controversy; but now, at the sight of the wounded Reena Kellner and the very disturbed boy who was laughing in the music room and sent merrily on his way, the old man felt compelled to act. He turned to Bobby who stepped back and reluctantly faced him in this direction.

"I want you to give me the gun, Bobby," the teacher said.

"I've never hurt you, and I know you won't hurt me. Just give me the gun before there's any more trouble, and we can sit down and talk about it."



He reached out to push aside the cold barrel pointed at his face, but again Bobby stepped back.

"No! Don't come any closer. You don't know! You don't understand! You can't stop me! No one can stop me!"

Pat Ender saw that Bobby was beyond reasoning, and made a decision that was as much reflex as it was calculation. While Bobby was turned to face Bill Bushnell who approached him from the far side of the room, Pat bent silently over the wounded Reena Kellner and desperately pulled her to her feet. Reena, in shock and almost helpless, moaned softly as Pat lifted and pulled her across the staffroom kitchen towards the cloakroom beyond it. The cloakroom housed the staff washrooms, and Pat knew there were doors with old-fashioned bolt locks strong enough to bar an elephant. Pat knew now that Bobby would kill Reena unless she escaped, unless they could make it to the bolted doors.

She struggled to move Reena with the strength of fear. It would only be a moment before Bobby turned and saw that they were gone.

Again Bill Bushnell stepped towards the boy. "Give me the gun," he said firmly. The old man was frightened, but he hoped that the boy was even more afraid, and that he could somehow get close enough to wrest the gun from Bobby's hands.

He reached out and his fingers brushed the gun barrel, but before his hand could close around the metal Bobby groaned loudly, a cry of desperation from deep in his throat, and with

a sudden movement swung the gunbutt forward to crack angrily against the old man's head. The music teacher collapsed in a heap at Bobby's feet.

Bobby groaned again as he looked at the fallen man. Why did they try to stop him? He didn't want to hurt the good ones.

Slowly he turned back to face Reena Kellner and Pat Ender, and his look of regret was suddenly transformed to one of rage as he saw that the two women were no longer there.

He raced through the archway into the kitchen area, and then into the cloakroom. When he saw the heavy door leading to the women's toilet tightly closed he guessed their hiding place and desperately threw his weight against the solid door. When it held he began to shout, and as he shouted the clanging fire bell ceased its clamor as suddenly as it had begun. His voice was hollow and fierce as it echoed in the confines of the cloakroom.

"Damn you! Damn you!" he screamed. "You won't get away! I'll find you. I'll get you! Do you hear me? I'll get you!" He hammered at the door with the rifle then he stepped back and fired a shot into the wood. Then, with a final wail, he turned and ran from the staffroom out into the hall. "I'll be back for you," he shouted. Don't ever forget that, I'll be back for you!"

There were tears of frustration in his eyes as he moved down the hall. Kellner had escaped. He had been crazy to turn his back. But it was only temporary. He would find her. When she

left the bathroom he would find her and she wouldn't get away again. For now he would just fetch Miss Arianakis and bring her to the art room.

Mrs. Sealson turned from the file cabinet with a card in her hand. For a moment she held her hands against her ears and shook her head. "The fire bell keeps ringing until all the students are either out of the school or gathered in the basement," she explained to the two policemen at the counter. And I swear those bells are enough to make you go deaf."

She placed the index card she had taken from the file on the counter top and found Bobby Bower's first period class. "He's in room 218 for the first period," she told the waiting constables, "but you'll have to wait until the fire alarm is over before I can send for him."

The two policemen nodded in unison just as the door to the office swung open and a muscular, red-faced man in a sweat suit bound in.

"Jesus! They're here already!" Charlie Hunchack exclaimed when he saw the two policemen at the counter. "How the hell-- I mean--I came up here to call you guys--and you're here already." He turned to Mrs. Sealson. "Did someone tell you already? Did you call the cops?"

"What are you blabbering about now?" the secretary asked with a laugh. She had rarely seen Charlie Hunchack this animated.

"You don't know?" Humchack answered in a puzzled voice. "There's been--an accident--downstairs--in the gym. I came up to call the police.

"Is that why Peggy Lipton rushed out of here with Mr. Petersen a while ago?" Mrs. Sealson asked. "I wondered what had happened. What kind of an accident was it?"

The fire bell stopped just as Charlie Humchack answered, and his voice cut through the new silence like a knife edge. "A student has been--killed! We found him in the locker room."

"My God!" Mrs. Sealson gasped. "Someone killed? Who was it?"

They heard the gunshot, faint at the distance, but still unmistakable, the sound carrying clearly in the empty halls and through the large air vents that laced the walls of the aging school like the veins of an old man's skin.

"That sounded like a gunshot," Humchack exclaimed.

The two police officers were already moving through the doorway into the hall. They had come to see Bobby Bower about a missing rifle. The sound of the shot, they knew, would lead them to him. Gautier was ahead. He had already drawn his pistol from its holster. He knew that the gunshot meant the boy had used the rifle he had stolen from the Handyman store. He only hoped that no one had been hurt. That no one would have to be hurt.

Charlie Humchack stared down the hallway after the two policemen who ran towards the sound of the gunshot. They had

pulled their revolvers, and he wasn't about to get in the way. He was jostled in the doorway by Christina Arianakis as she pushed past him. "Hey, where are you going?" he called out as she began to follow the police officers. "You trying to get killed or something?"

"Somebody might get hurt!" Christina called back. "Maybe I can help."

"You can't help if you're dead," Hunchack barked. "Those are real guns!" He shook his head and frowned. The girl was crazy. She was out to get killed.

As he made his way down the hall, Bobby really hoped that Miss Arianakis was still in the office. Things were not going right. Miss Kellner had escaped, and Miss Arianakis hadn't been in the staffroom where she was supposed to be, and he might never find her now, or he might have to hurt people to get her back to the art room. The fire bell had sent all the kids to the basement, but soon they would be streaming up the stairs and through the halls as they returned to their classrooms.

Bobby felt a wave of nausea sweep up from his belly and across his skin, and for a moment he leaned a hand against the wall of the corridor to steady himself. It was then that he heard footsteps--running footsteps--moving in his direction from around the bend in the hallway near the office. Someone was coming to stop him. He lifted the rifle to his shoulder and

stood there waiting. No one would stop him now!

When police constable Raymond Gautier turned the corner of the corridor that led to the staffroom of Parkview High, he knew he had made a mistake. Despite his training, and despite his years on the force, he had ignored the basic rule of survival demanding caution and fear. Perhaps it was the fatigue of the overtime shift. Perhaps it was the school setting that had lulled him into carelessness. He was never to know.

As he turned the corner at a shuffling run and saw the boy with the rifle crouched against the wall, Gautier realized his error, realized that danger was always there, and that it was always most deadly in its unexpected forms. And with that final flashing realization, Gautier's life came to a sudden end, stilled by the speeding bullet that hammered against his chest and tore a small jagged hole in his heart.

Behind him, still around the corner, Malo broke stride and flattened against the wall. He had seen Gautier race around the corner, breathing heavily with the extra weight he had recently gained, had heard the shot echo in the empty hall, had felt in his own flesh the dull thud of the bullet and the heavy, crashing fall of his partner's body.

He pressed his back against the wall to listen. Around the corner was someone with a gun. His partner had been shot. He had to be calm and cautious.

The girl--the one from the office--ran to his side, and he reached out his arm to keep her from turning the corner.

"He's hurt--we've got to help!" Christina protested, pushing against Malo's arm in an effort to reach the fallen officer Gautier.

"Stay!" Malo commanded in English. "You go--you be shot."

Christina covered her face with her hands. "It's horrible," she moaned. She too, had heard the rifle's sharp report, and had heard, as well, Gautier's small squeal of pain as the bullet ripped the life from his body.

Suddenly from around the corner there was the sound of another shot and the echo of the screams that followed. Malo moved then, swinging around the corner, his knees bent and his gun held tightly before him with both hands. At the far end of the long hall he saw a blond-haired boy with a rifle running up the stairs to the second floor.

Behind him the young woman screamed. "Don't shoot! I know him!" But Malo fired, two quick shots that were wide and low, hitting against the stairs under the boy's feet as he vanished around the bend in the stairwell.

"You could have killed him!" the woman protested.

"Malo whirled on her. "He shoot my friend. He try to shoot me. You want to let him go, tabernac?" His eyes were filled with anger. Then, quickly, he reached down and felt for the pulse of his fallen partner. The man was dead. "Merde!" he swore softly.

He turned back to Christina Arianakis who stood there silently, staring down at the dead policeman. "I go for help," he said in a flat, even voice. "You tell them to get the people out this school. Is too dangerous to stay inside." He left her standing motionless as he ran to the squad car radio to call for assistance.

When Bobby pulled the trigger and saw the fat policeman sprawl to the ground with a bullet in his chest, he felt a wave of panic and confusion. When he had said that no one could stop him, he was not thinking of the police. Policemen carried guns and often travelled in pairs. He just couldn't figure out why they were there, how they had arrived so quickly, before he was ready for them. He saw the one policeman lying still where he had fallen, and he knew that others would be close behind. With tears stinging his eyes he turned and ran.

As he raced past the staffroom towards the stairs leading to the second floor, a small group of students approached the glass doors of the stairwell. They had heard the sounds of the gunshots and slipped up unnoticed from the basement. Two of the girls in the group began to shriek as Bobby raced towards them. Frightened, the boy raised the gun and fired in their direction as he ran. By chance, a small, frail boy was hit and fell to the floor. The others, in panic, scrambled and fought to escape. One girl, even smaller than the boy who had been hit by the bullet,



was pushed in the scramble and fell headlong down the flight of stairs, her unconscious body trampled by the others in their unheeding terror.

Bobby slammed against the glass door to the stairwell and leapt up the stairs as fast as his stubby legs would move. There were sudden gunshots behind him, and bullets wedged into the stairs beside his feet. He didn't look back, but only increased his speed, turning the bend in the stairs and reaching in his pocket for the key to the art room door.

His hand trembled as he tried to fit the key into the lock, and he was forced to lean the rifle against the door and grip one hand with the other in order to steady himself. Tears filled his eyes. Again his plan had been spoiled. He had not expected the police to be there. Now he had lost Miss Arianakis as well as Kellner.

He entered the classroom and snapped off the light switch next to the door. It would be dark without the lights, the sky had grown overcast and only dull greyness filtered in through the windows, but the darkness would protect them from discovery. He moved quickly to close the blinds. As he pulled down the last of the green shades over the tall classroom windows, he stopped and looked for a moment at the sky. A gentle snow had begun to fall, and it drifted slowly against the panes of glass.

The room was dark now, lit only by the light that squeezed in around the edges of the vinyl blinds. Bobby stood quietly in

the darkness waiting for his eyes to adjust. He blinked nervously as he walked to the Japanese screen, and removing it looked down anxiously at the still unconscious figure of Stephen Chambers and the wide, frightened eyes of Elena Giannopoulos still gagged and handcuffed to the chair.

"I couldn't get them," Bobby told her tearfully, as though it was necessary to apologize for what had happened: "Miss Arianakis wasn't in the staffroom like she was supposed to be, and Kellner locked herself in the toilet and got away. I've got to wait-- got to find them later. The police are here. I had to shoot one. They wanted to stop me. I had to do it. I couldn't let them stop me. They shouldn't be here!"

There was a noise in the hallway beyond the door of the art room. Bobby cocked his head to one side and listened. It was a voice, still faint and distant. A woman's voice--calling out. Bobby ran quietly to the door and pressed his ear against the varnished wood.

Christina Arianakis fought to retain control. Something horrible had happened today, and somehow she felt responsible. Bobby had been her friend--trusted her--but she had failed him, and it had come to this.

One thought filled her mind. That Bobby was on the second floor of the school with a loaded rifle and that his life, and the lives of others, were in danger. She remembered their talks

How lonely Bobby had been at times. How lonely and afraid. She wanted to talk to him now. To tell him that what he had done was wrong, but that it could end here, that no one else had to be hurt, that they would help him if only he would let them. She was not afraid. Bobby would never hurt her. She had seen his feelings for her in his eyes and she knew she would be safe. All she had to do was find him quickly.

The policeman had left the school to radio for help. There was still a chance she could find him first. No one was there to stop her.

She turned from the fallen body of constable Gautier and walked quickly towards the nearby stairwell. It was then she saw several students approaching, their heads peering up the stairs from the basement.

"Get back downstairs," she ordered sharply. There would be trouble if the students gathered in the basement discovered what had happened.

Albert Barick, the English department head, appeared in the stairwell behind the students and motioned for them to return downstairs. "They slipped by," he explained, calling up the stairs to Christina. "What the hell is going on, anyway? We heard what sounded like explosions, and there were kids yelling at the other end of the basement."

"There's been an accident," Christina said urgently. "You had better start clearing the school. Get everyone out right away. The police will be here in a minute, and they'll want the

school cleared."

"But what's happened?" Barick wanted to know.

"I don't have time for questions," Christina pleaded. "Just clear the school--please, Albert. And don't let anyone come upstairs. Not anyone! Do you understand?"

Barick, surprised by the insistence in her voice, nodded his agreement.

Christina turned from him and hurried up the stairs to the second floor. The upstairs hallway was empty. The grey light of the wintery day was greyer still in the barren corridor. There was an unfamiliar silence in the air. No sound of teachers' voices droning out their lessons, no high-pitched student chatter or the scratch and tap of chalk on aging blackboards.

Christina suddenly felt very alone. Despite the warmth that filled the air from the steel-grilled vents on the wall above her, she felt a touch of chill on her skin and slowly rubbed her arms with her hands.

Where could he be? she wondered. Where could Bobby be hiding? The doors to the classrooms were all closed and locked. Could he have gotten into one of them? Or was he in the washroom down by the art room?

She called out his name. "Bobby! Bobby, where are you? It's Miss Arianakis, Bobby. Please tell me where you are." She spoke softly, but her voice carried and echoed in the silence. As she called out she walked the long corridor, her steps tight and narrow like a deer at the edge of an open glade. They had

been friends. Bobby wouldn't want to harm her. She could save him from being hurt.

Robert Petersen stood with his hand on the switch of the fire-alarm just beyond the large double-door of the gymnasium. As soon as the students came downstairs and gathered in the basement, he would explain to them that school was over for the day. It was important they understood that although the dismissal was not an emergency--that there wasn't really a fire--it was still essential that they cleared the school quickly and quietly--without any delay or excuse. He would give them five minutes to retrieve their books and coats from their lockers, but no more than that.

Once the school had been cleared he could meet with teachers in the staffroom and tell them as much as he knew. The police would have arrived by then, and they could begin their investigation.

John Vavaris! He still couldn't believe it. Vavaris had annoyed more than his share of teachers, and had been in the office more often than most, but he was still young and strong and a gifted athlete when he wanted to be. It was horrible to see so much life taken away so soon and so cruelly, cut off by an act of hatred and violence. Somewhere, somehow, the school--and the world--continued to fail. Someone--perhaps someone in the school--another student--was filled with enough anger and enough pain to

3

kill for it. They had all failed to find and reach that someone. They had let it go unnoticed, or perhaps just tucked it away to be forgotten. Now the price of their neglect had been paid. Paid by John Vavaris most of all, but surely paid by all of them one way or another.

Petersen was torn from his thoughts by the sound of students flooding into the basement in response to the fire-bell. Teachers began to line their classes near the door. If the bell continued it was the signal to evacuate the school. If it stopped, the exercise was only a drill and students remained inside.

Petersen flicked the switch that cut off the alarm. There was a sudden hushed stillness. He began to make his way across the basement to the game area. There he could stand on one of the ping pong tables and address the school.

As he walked, there was the sound of a muffled explosion that drifted through the air vents from the floor above. A hundred heads glanced upward and voices were raised in question.

Petersen lifted his hands for attention. "Quiet please," he called out in a loud voice. "I'd like to have your attention for a moment." He didn't want the students distracted. He would have time to investigate the noise after he had spoken.

When the rabble of voices died away he began to explain their early dismissal. "The fire-bell has been rung so that I could meet with you here and explain very briefly what you will be expected to do in the next few minutes. We've had a bit of

trouble this morning, and it has become necessary--"

A second explosion, closer this time, sent another muffled wave of sound through the basement. Petersen hesitated for a moment then quickly continued. He saw several students standing by the door slip cautiously up the stairs towards the first floor. His eyes momentarily flashed his annoyance but he let it pass. He would deal with them later.

"As I was saying," he began again, "certain circumstances that will be explained in a later announcement have made it necessary for us to--"

There was a third explosion, this time sounding much like the sharp crack of a gunshot, and accompanied by shouts and screams as the students who had slipped up the stairs fled back to the basement in panic. Pandemonium began to break loose as groups of excited students began to talk and shout and push towards the stairwell door.

Petersen leapt off the table and thrust his way through the excited throng of students. "Clear the door," he shouted. "Clear back out of the way!"

His words were followed by two more echoing gunshots, and somewhere in the crowd of students a girl screamed loudly.

Other teachers had hurriedly made their way to the foot of the stairwell.

"What happened?" he demanded.

"Someone--a boy--with a gun!" a thin-faced girl sniffled

through her tears. "He—he shot at us!"

"Someone fell down!" a small boy added. He burst into tears and Petersen felt the fear in them. They were young--grade eight students--they were only children.

"Go down to the other end of the basement," he told them gently. "Tell the teachers that I said they were to clear the school. Tell them to get everybody out. Do you understand?"

The children nodded. "Hurry up!" Petersen said urgently. If what they said was true, there was someone in the school with a gun. Those sounds they had all heard, they had been gunshots! And someone had been hurt. The kids had said that someone had fallen!

He took the stairs two at a time, stopping suddenly as he turned the angle in the stairwell mid-way to the first floor and came across the unconscious body of a young girl.

He knelt and gently turned her over. There was no bleeding, no bullet wound, only a dark, ugly bruise on her forehead. He realized that she must have been pushed when the others had panicked and fled down the stairs. He took off his jacket, rolled it and placed it carefully under her head. The girl groaned softly. She was coming around. She would have a headache for a while, but she was going to be alright. He decided to leave her where she was and return for her later when he had checked the first floor.

He started up the stairs a second time and stopped again when



he saw the dark-haired boy clutching his bloodied leg. Petersen knew him by name. Gus Thomakis, a grade nine student. He was conscious, but in shock.

Petersen knelt beside him. "Are you alright?"

"I'm bleeding," the boy said softly. "I'm bleeding." His eyes were glazed and out of focus.

Petersen ripped open the boy's pant leg to get a better look at the wound. It wasn't as serious as he had feared. A flesh wound. The bleeding had already stopped.

"Take it easy," he comforted. "We'll get you to the hospital and have that taken care of." He picked up the wounded student in his arms and began to walk quickly down the hall towards the office. At the far end of the corridor he saw Charlie Humchack kneeling over another motionless body sprawled on the floor. Mrs. Sealson had left the office and was leaning above him.

Petersen felt the sudden perspiration on his body. His shirt stuck to his skin in large, damp patches. As he got close he saw that the figure on the floor was a policeman. "How is he?" he quietly asked the kneeling gym teacher.

"Humchack shook his head. "Dead," he said flatly.

"My God! What the hell is happening? Petersen groaned. "What in Jesus' name is going on?"

Humchack stood up to face him. "Someone has a gun. They started shooting and the cops ran to check it out. They were already in the office when I got there, and when they heard the

shot they took off like bats outa hell. This one got hit and his partner ran out to get help. Christina saw it happen. She was out here with the cops a minute ago, but she's disappeared. When the cop started shooting back she yelled at him to stop-- said she knew who it was with the gun. I never saw anything like it. One cop dead on the floor and the other one mad as hell because Christina didn't want him to shoot at the gunman!"

Down the hall the door to the staffroom flew open, and a pale-faced Gilles Bernot scurried down the hall in their direction.

"Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu! he exclaimed, his hands fluttering.

"He is hurt--Bill--Bill Bushnell--the boy hit him with the rifle! His head is bleeding and he cannot walk!"

"What are you saying?" Petersen asked, his body stiffening with dread. "There are more people hurt?" It was becoming a nightmare. One thing after another.

"The boy--Bobby--he came to the staffroom," Bernot explained in his rapid, accented voice. "He had a gun--a rifle. He said he would kill us unless we told him where Christina was. He wanted Christina, but I don't know why. And then Reena, she told him that Christina was in the office. Bobby turned on her and shouted 'guilty! guilty!' and then he shot her! I didn't know what to do, I was shocked, but Bill Bushnell tried to stop him-- to take the gun--and Bobby hit him with la crosse --the butt! Then Pat took Reena and ran into the bathroom and locked the big wooden door. Bobby tried to get in--shot at the lock--but the

door was too strong. Pat and Reena are still in the bathroom. Reena won't come out. And poor Bill is still on the floor!"

"Jesus!" Humchack muttered. "The kid you're talking about-- Bobby--is that Bobby Bower?"

"Yes! Bobby Bower," Bernot nodded.

"I knew that kid was a nut case," Humchack said angrily. "I knew it the first day he was in this school. We should have done something. Now we have a goddamn nut case running around the school with a gun!"

"Okay, okay! We'll take care of it," Petersen said with authority. "It's a little late for regrets. We just have to make sure nothing else happens--that no one else gets hurt."

Petersen felt as though he had just stumbled through a storm and had somehow miraculously arrived unharmed at the eye of the hurricane. He was no longer held by the sense of panic and confusion that had welled up and peaked in him as he hurried down the hall with the wounded boy in his arms and saw the crumpled figure of the fallen policeman. Now he was calm again, and able to think. There was a right way and a wrong way to handle things, and for the sake of the children whose lives were now in danger, it had to be done right.

"Charlie--go downstairs," he told the brooding gym teacher. "See that everybody is cleared out of the school. Everybody! Teachers too! Nobody is to come upstairs. Lives are in danger as long as people are in the school. Take them to the Armory

across the street. We'll call them and tell them we have an emergency here. They know what to do. And Charlie--make it seem like part of the fire-drill. Some people know already, but we don't want a panic starting. Now get going!"

He turned to the science teacher who was staring wide-eyed at the snaking line of blood that had flowed out from beneath the dead policeman. "Gilles, you get back to the staffroom. Tell Pat and Reena that it's okay--that the police are here. Get them out of the bathroom and out of the school. Have Pat help you with Bill if she can. I want you to get him out too--even if you have to carry him!"

The Frenchman nodded, glad for something to do. "As you say," he nodded, turning back towards the staffroom.

"Mrs. Sealson," Petersen snapped at the secretary who was clenching tightly at the string of costume pearls she wore at her neck. "Get on the phone and tell the Armory we're coming. Then call an ambulance--better make that two ambulances! And make sure the office has been cleared--see that the guidance people have left--and get out of here yourself. I want this school empty right now!"

The plump, matronly secretary turned and headed for the office without a word. Petersen saw from her quick, purposeful step that she had regained her self control and that the office was still in competent hands. He followed, the boy still in his arms, and while the woman used the phone, he placed the injured child on

the counter and signalled with his hands that she should watch him until the ambulance arrived.

With that, he turned and retraced his steps along the hall. He would bring the unconscious girl back to the office and try to find a blanket to cover the body of the dead policeman. Then he would make sure that the basement had been cleared and that the students had been moved to the Armory. By that time, hopefully, the police would have arrived and taken over.

Constable Rejean Malo climbed out of the squad car parked across from the school and shivered as the cold morning wind bit the skin of his hands and cheeks. He pulled the zipper of his blue nylon uniform and reached for the leather gloves in the large side pocket. He had sent out the call for assistance, and even now Emergency Squads were converging on the area. It was not all that often that the police had to deal with a gunman gone berserk--not like Detroit or New York. It was not, somehow, the style of the city, where violent crimes were far more often linked to bank robberies or cold, careful professional slayings. But it did happen. Once in a while. Even here. And like other cities they had men trained to deal with it.

Malo slammed one gloved fist against the other. He took out the gun strapped to his waist and flicked off the safety. His eyes roamed the empty windows of the school and he remembered Gautier on the floor in his own blood. If he saw the boy--if

he caught just a glimse of him he would blow his brains out. Fucking asshole kids! Give them everything and what do you get in return. Bums! Killers! He had seen it. He knew. Drunk. Doped-up. Running the streets looking for excitement. They would rob a store for thrills. Beat up an old man for kicks and the couple of dollars he might have in his pocket. He would take them all and put them away for good. Throw away the key. Gautier was dead. A good cop with a wife and family. Up for a desk job and talking about the pension like it was an old friend. All he wanted--all he had asked for was a few years of the good life--life without every punk and bastard in the city wanting to cut him down and stuff him in a hole in the ground.

It was no kid crouching with a rifle behind the walls of the school. It was a maniac. An animal. Something unholy to be wiped away.

Malo cursed softly in the joual of his youth. If God only gave him a chance. One clear shot. Just one! He would splatter the animal's brains across the sky.

Suddenly his attention was drawn to the swarms of students who began to file from the narrow front parking lot along the side of the school. They walked in lines beside their teachers, and despite the cold wind and the snow that had begun to fall, they wore no coats and hats. Malo was pleased to see that the school was being cleared. It would make it easier to close in on the killer.

He saw that the students seemed to be moving with a purpose, that they walked in a long, straggling line down Saint Urbain to Rachel Street, then along Rachel to Esplanade. It seemed they were being taken to the Armory on the corner where they would be warm and out of the way.

Traffic on Saint Urbain Street began to slow and jam as the long line of students made their way across the street, and Malo grew concerned that the Emergency Squad might be delayed in the back-up.

In minutes though, spurred by the cold winds, the line of students thinned and disappeared. Malo saw a man in a crumpled white shirt exit from the central door. There were others with him. Adults, and a small girl. Some of them appeared to be hurt, and the man held a boy in his arms. When he saw Malo, the man signalled for him to come over.

"The school is cleared," the man said. "We're the last. Some of these people are hurt, and we've sent for an ambulance. I'd like to leave them here, just inside the door where it's warm, and I was hoping you could stay close--" and here the man's voice dropped so as not to be overheard by the others, "--just in case--the boy with the gun--".

Malo nodded. "I can stay near," he said.

"Thank you," Petersen responded, bending low to place the injured boy on the floor by the door. "By the way, I'm Petersen, the vice-principal here. I imagine you've been in touch with

your headquarters."

"Yes," Malo replied. He noticed that the man was disheveled and tired. There was blood on his white shirt and the edge of his grey pants. The policeman realized that this was likely the first time any of these people had been witness to real violence and death, but he felt no sympathy. He had no feeling for anything that was connected to the squat, brown school where his friend had died.

"Are they sending people to help?" Petersen asked.

"Oui," Malo replied. "They are coming soon."

"The boy in there--Bobby--" Petersen said, jerking his thumb up the stairs. "I don't know why he's done what he has, but he needs help. Is there anything I can do? Any way to avoid more bloodshed?"

Malo looked at the weary vice-principal with a touch of disdain. "You are all the same," he said strongly. "You worry about the killers--not the ones they kill! There is nothing you can do. He is maniac. If he does not come out he will be shot!"

Petersen nodded unhappily and stepped outside. The wind clutched at his thin, untidy shirt. The sound of wailing sirens growing closer could be heard in the distance.

Charlie Humchack ran up the sidewalk from the direction of the Armory. He greeted Petersen breathlessly. "Most of the kids are inside the Armory gym," he gasped. "A few escaped to the pool halls before we got 'em all in, but at least they're out of



the way."

"Good," Petersen replied. "I had a quick look around the basement before I came out, and I think we got everybody. Did you notice if old Evangelos, the janitor, got over to the Armory?"

"Yeah. He's there. He was showing the kids the steps to a Greek dance. The old boy should be a teacher," Humchack said. Then he shook his head slightly and added: "But there was one person I didn't see."

"Who was that?" Petersen asked.

"Well," Humchack explained. "You remember I told you that just after the policeman was shot Christina Arianakis went a little wild--started yelling at the other cop not to shoot?"

"I remember."

"Well, it seems she was yelling because she saw it was Bobby Bower with the gun--some kids over at the Armory were saying that they saw Bobby--that he shot at them. And I guess Bobby was a favorite of Christina's--or maybe she felt responsible for him or something. And anyway, when I went to the Armory I remembered that Christina had suddenly disappeared after the cop shot at Bobby and ran to get help, so I climbed up to the balcony over the gym and I looked all over the place for Christina just to be sure she had gotten out of the school alright. But I couldn't see her anywhere. Now I'm starting to think that maybe she didn't go downstairs like I thought. Maybe she went upstairs instead--maybe she went to look for Bobby."

"My God!" Petersen exclaimed. "I've got to go back in there." He opened the door to the school and began to walk up the stairs towards the first floor.

"Hey, attendez!" Malo called after him. "You can't go in there."

"I have to," Petersen insisted. "One of our teachers may still be inside. Her life could be in danger."

"Your job is done," the policeman told him. "The rest is for us to do. No one can go inside until the captain comes."

Outside the door sirens and flashing red lights indicated the arrival of the ambulances from the nearby hospital.

"Okay, I'll wait," Petersen said grimly. "But you're responsible if Christina is still inside." He turned to Charlie Humchack. "Charlie, help me get these people into the ambulance."

Petersen looked at each of them as they were placed in the red and white hospital vehicles. They seemed to be okay. Reena's wound had stopped bleeding, as had the boy's. Bill Bushnell was recovering slowly, and the girl who had fallen down the stairs was conscious again.

"I'm alright," Pat Ender said as Petersen helped her towards one of the ambulances. "I wasn't hurt. I don't need to go to the hospital. Maybe I can help out here."

"You're sure?" Petersen asked. "You can go along if you like."

"No--no!" I'm fine. And the doctors can take care of Reena, she doesn't need me anymore."

"I hear you saved Reena's life," Charlie Humchack said.

"We were lucky," Pat told him. "If that bathroom door wasn't so old--if it didn't have that big bolt lock on it. Well, I hate to think what would have happened. When Bobby tried to shoot his way through I just stood there and prayed."

"Will Reena be okay?" Humchack asked.

"It's a flesh wound," Pat nodded. "I got the bleeding stopped with some paper towels. She was in shock, but she'll be okay."

"She should thank her lucky stars you were there," Humchack insisted. "Bernot says she'd be dead now if you hadn't dragged her away."

"I think Bill Bushnell deserves the praise," Pat told him.

"He was the one who distracted Bobby, and he paid for it with that lump on his head. He's the real hero in this thing."

"I'm glad you're both safe," Petersen cut in. "But we've still got a big problem on our hands, and I'll tell you what you can do." He placed a hand on the gym teacher's broad shoulder. "Charlie, you and Pat get back to the Armory and make a list of all the teachers you can find. Maybe you just missed Christina last time, and I want to be sure. In any case, I want to know if anybody else is missing. Check with Mrs. Sealson for anyone away on sick leave." He shook his head slowly. "If people are missing, we may be in bigger trouble than we think!"

By the time he had finished speaking, the police Emergency Squad had arrived, and constable Malo waved him over to speak with captain Guy Lafontaine, a short, intense-looking man with a pencil mustache and gold-braid decoration on the brim of his cap.

Quickly briefed by Malo, the captain consulted Petersen on the layout of the school, and drew a quick sketch of the floor-plan, marking in red ink the various doors and exits.

Efficiently he dispatched a unit of newly-arrived riot police to cordon off the streets that enclosed Parkview High, and to push back the curious crowd that had been lured by the sirens and the flashing lights that whirled down Saint Urbain Street.

Other policemen were dispatched to remove the onlookers whose faces appeared in the windows of the three-story apartment buildings directly across from the school.

"Get those people out of the windows before they get hurt," Lafontaine yelled at his lieutenant. "And get some rifles up on the roofs, we may get lucky and spot him."

The snipers, white-helmeted and armed with scoped automatics, took their positions on the rooftops around the school. From there, all the doors were covered and Parkview was surrounded.

A public address system was brought up and Lafontaine called for Bobby's surrender. "The school is surrounded," the captain's voice crackled in the canyon formed by the buildings on Saint

Urbain. "There is no way out. No hope of escape. Surrender now before you are hurt."

They waited, but there was no response from the boy in the school. No indication that Bobby had heard.

Charlie Humchack appeared, a strange figure in the red warm-up suit he still wore. He sought out Bob Petersen who had taken shelter from the cold wind in the back seat of constable Malo's squad car.

"Here's the list of people we can't find," Humchack said, climbing into the car and handing Petersen a staff list with two names circled. "Only two that we know of--Christina and Steve Chambers. Couldn't find a trace of them anywhere, and we know they were both in school today. Christina must be still inside. Maybe Chambers too."

"God--if Bobby hurts them--" Petersen groaned.

Captain Lafontaine's voice again echoed against the silent bricks of the besieged high school, again calling for Bobby's surrender.

"I think I'll ask the captain if I can try talking to Bobby," Petersen decided. "Maybe the boy will listen to a familiar voice."

"Maybe we ought to call his folks," Humchack suggested.

"That's been done," Petersen said. "The captain sent a car to pick up Bobby's mother. We don't know where the father works so we haven't gotten in touch with him, but the mother should be here soon."

The two men climbed out of the car. It was snowing more heavily now, and the wind gusted the white flakes into swirling mists.

"Why don't you take my top?" Humchack suggested, unzipping the nylon jacket of his warm-up suit. "I'm going to head back to the Armory. Things are pretty wild over there. The kids can hear the sirens and they want to know what's going on. The teachers have to stand by the doors to keep them from busting out."

"Thanks," Petersen said gratefully as he took the jacket Humchack held out to him. "It's bloody cold out here." He could already feel the icy wind creeping up against his skin. "I'll send word as soon as something happens."

Petersen spoke briefly to the captain who shrugged and handed him the microphone to the P.A. system. "You can try," Lafontaine said. "But while you're talking I'm getting my men ready to go into the school."

"Captain--please," Petersen argued. "I have reason to believe that the boy has hostages. Two of our teachers are missing. No one has seen them since the shooting began. If you send men into the school their lives might be endangered."

"If he has hostages, that's all the more reason we should be ready to move in," the police captain explained. "The boy hasn't talked to us. We don't know why he's there or what he wants. But we do know that he's killed once, and he could kill again."

It's a big building. If we wait, he could hold us off for a long time. And if he gets frightened and panics--it may be all over for any hostages."

"My God, captain! Don't you think the boy is already frightened? Don't you think he's already panicked?" Petersen exclaimed.

Lafontaine shrugged. "Perhaps. We don't know. What is he doing in there? He hasn't talked to us. He hasn't responded to our warnings. If we move now--quickly--we may catch him unprepared."

"Can't we at least wait until the boy's mother and father arrive? Maybe they can reach him."

"We won't go after the boy until the mother tries to talk him out. But if that doesn't work, my men will be ready."

Petersen thumbed the 'on' button of the microphone. The cold had already crept into his fingers and his hands were stiff. Captain Lafontaine signalled to the police van parked by the large, frosted window of Nicko's restaurant, and a half-dozen men clad in bullet-proof vests and carrying automatic rifles, jumped from the rear of the truck onto the white, drifting snow that had begun to cover the street.

Petersen spoke into the microphone. "Bobby, can you hear me? Listen to me, Bobby. This is Mr. Petersen speaking. You have to listen, Bobby." He paused, staring hopefully at the silent wall of the old school. "Put down your gun and come out."

If you have the others with you, let them go. You won't be hurt. I promise you. Just put down the gun and come out. We can help you. We want to help you, Bobby. We'll do everything we can. Just trust us!"

There was no response. They waited several minutes in the cold, the snow settling in white layers on their arms and shoulders. Then Lafontaine took the microphone from Petersen's hand. "He isn't coming out," the captain said. "You may as well give up."

Petersen looked at the smaller man and said nothing.

"Do you have keys for inside the school?" the captain asked.

"Yes."

"My men will need them. We don't know which part of the school he's holed up in."

Petersen took the keys from his pocket, and the police captain handed them to one of the helmeted men who stood nearby.

"I thought you were going to wait until the mother arrived," Petersen said accusingly, as the Emergency Squad approached the school entrance.

"They're just going in to pinpoint his position," Lafontaine told him. "We want to know where he is. They've been told to be careful--to stay out of sight."

"How can they stay out of sight when they don't know where he is?" Petersen complained. "They're going in there blind!"

"My men know their job," the captain snapped angrily. "Let them do it!"



Petersen turned and walked back towards the squad car and the shelter it provided from the wind. The cold had already penetrated the thin top he had borrowed from Charlie Humchack, and even in the car he shivered helplessly. There was nothing more he could do. Waiting. That was the worst of all. Just waiting.

In the art room on the second floor of Parkview High, a distance from Saint Urbain Street, but still close enough to hear the amplified voices of the P.A. system, four more people waited.

Stephen Chambers had regained consciousness. He lay, still, on the floor, his hands and feet bound in the rope Bobby had twisted and tied around them. He groaned softly and rolled his head slowly across the white sweater Christina Arianakis had removed and placed beneath his neck.

Bobby had heard Christina calling his name in the corridor. She had walked past the art room and he had swung open the door. When she had turned to look at him her eyes had held no fear, and Bobby, suddenly ashamed, had cast his own gaze aside.

"Bobby, I want to give Stephen a drink of water," Christina said softly when Chambers groaned again.

Bobby nodded, stepping back against the shelves at the side of the room while Christina filled the old, cracked cup with water from the sink near the door.

"He's alright," the boy said sullenly as Christina gently pressed the cup to Chambers' lips. "I didn't hit him hard."

"Maybe you hit him harder than you think," the woman replied. "He has a bad cut on the back of his head."

"I just wanted to knock him down," Bobby whined. "If I want to hurt I hit real, real hard. I didn't try to hit hard."

"But why, Bobby? Why have you done this? Why have you hurt people and tied up Stephen and Elena? I don't understand, Bobby. You've never hurt anyone before! What's happened to you?"

The boy dropped his eyes to the ground and touched a finger to the thick, heavy glasses that had slipped down his nose. "I-- I wanted you all to be here. Even you, Miss Arianakis. I went down to get you but the others wanted to stop me. I had to shoot them and run away. I couldn't let them stop me."

"But why, Bobby? Why did you want us? We would have come if you had asked us. You and I are friends, Bobby. You know that. I'm sure you do. That's why I came up here. To talk to you as your friend. To ask you not to hurt anyone else and to come downstairs with me."

Bobby slowly shook his head. "It's time to fix things up, Miss Arianakis. You and Elena have to understand. Mr. Chambers is like John Vavaris and Kellner--he wants to hurt people just like they do. And I couldn't let him do that. I couldn't let him hurt you and Elena. I'll punish him, and then we can be friends and no one will hurt you."

Christina began to protest when the slant of yellow light that crept into the dark room from the crack beneath the door suddenly vanished as the lights in the hall were extinguished. Bobby saw it and tensed perceptibly.

"What is it, Bobby?" Christina asked, trying to calm him as he jerked the barrel of the rifle towards the door.

"They're trying to find us," the boy whispered. "They turned out the lights so they could sneak around in the dark and find us." He swung the gun back towards the woman. "I'm sorry, Miss Arianakis, but I got to tie you up for a while."

"No, Bobby!" the teacher said sternly, certain that the boy didn't want to harm her. "I won't let you tie me. I came here as your friend and I expect you to act like mine."

"Please, Miss Arianakis," the boy pleaded. "I have to go. I have to find out where they are and stop them from looking for us until we're finished. If you won't let me tie you, I'll have to take care of Mr. Chambers right now!" He swung the gun menacingly in Chambers' direction.

Christina, alarmed, held out her hand. "Bobby--wait! You can tie me. Just--please--don't hurt anyone."

Quickly Bobby tied and gagged her. His hands trembled as he touched her, and his voice was soft and apologetic. "I--I'm real sorry. Real sorry, Miss Arianakis. I don't want to tie you and Elena, but I just have to. It won't be for long. I'll be back soon." He replaced the gag Christina had removed from

Chambers' mouth when she had given him the water and then he checked Elena's bonds. "I'm sorry to you too, Elena," he said to the girl. "If you'll promise not to scream no more, I'll take the gag out as soon as I get back--I promise."

As Bobby walked towards the door, there was a rustle of movement from within the guitar case that stood open on the classroom counter. Bobby approached it. "Whatsa matter, Hermie? Don't like the bag? I don't blame you--no, I don't. But I had to bring you along today--you're my good luck!"

He turned towards his three prisoners. "This is Hermie, my toad. He helps me decide what to do and he brings me luck. He's my best friend." Bobby slipped the toad beneath his shirt, turned away, and stopped once more at the door. "I'll be back real soon," he said without looking back. "Then we'll finish what we have to do."

The six policemen stood by the main power switch in the furnace room of the sub-basement. Using Petersen's sketch of the layout of the school, the squad had moved quickly to turn off the power. Captain Lafontaine had reasoned that it would be easier for the men to search the school with the lights extinguished in the hallways, letting the shadows and dimness provide the men with cover. The snipers on the roofs were to be kept aware of their location and advance by walkie-talkie.

The squad divided itself into three teams. Two men to search

the basement area, two more the first floor, and the last two the upper level. They could communicate among themselves through their hand-held radios, and they would stay as close to one another as the walls and the stairways allowed.

Bobby moved in the shadows of the third floor. Crouching low he peered out through the edge of the hallway window. On the roof of the building across the open expanse of the courtyard parking lot, Bobby saw a propped gun barrel and the small movement of a white helmet that was not quite lost in the swirl of blowing snow. The police were on the roofs waiting to catch sight of him.

A thin smile crossed his lips. They had turned off the lights to sneak up on him, thinking he was like a frightened rabbit hiding in its burrow while the dogs closed in. But they were wrong. The darkness in the hallways helped him. Now he could see out--see them waiting on the roofs with their guns--but they could no longer see in and he was hidden from them and could move about without detection.

It was while he crouched by the window that Bobby heard the noise. The small click of metal against metal. A small sound, but one that originated from somewhere nearby, somewhere just around the corner from where he stood and carried by the still, silent air of the corridor. The boy held his breath and fought the panic that urged him to run--to make a headlong flight back

to the art room. But whoever had made the sound was too close, and he knew he would never make it back without being seen.

Carefully, still too afraid to breath, Bobby slipped across the hall from the window and into the deeper shadow of the recessed doorway to one of the third floor science labs. Listening, he heard a whispered voice and the soft metallic buzz of a radioed response. Bobby closed his eyes and strained for every sound. They had come around the corner now--two of them--their careful footsteps all but silent on the hallway floor; one man pressed to the lockers, his shoulder sometimes touching a loose door, the other man across from him and trailing, walking near the windows.

Bobby tensed. They would walk right by the spot where he hid in the shadow of the doorway. He would only have one chance.

As the man next to the lockers edged past the recess in which Bobby crouched like a coiled spring, the boy swung the rifle butt up and out, catching the unsuspecting policeman flush on the chin and sending him sprawling backwards to the floor. As the man fell Bobby threw himself back into the recess and clawed for the trigger of the rifle. The gun of the second policeman thundered through the empty hallway, but his position behind the first man placed him at a bad angle, and the bullets crashed harmlessly into the plaster wall beyond the boy.

Then, in a low crouch, while the bullets still pumped from the policeman's rifle, Bobby fired around the corner of the wall

and saw the second man pitch backwards to the floor.

On the roof of the building across the parking lot, the sniper waiting in the snow saw the flash of the barking guns, but held his fire because of the darkness in the hallway, and because he knew his fellow policemen had entered the corridor.

While he waited, alarmed and nervous, his finger pressed to the trigger of his sleek, scoped rifle, Bobby fled down the hall in the direction he had come.

As he ran, the boy dug his hand into the pocket of his pants for the key to the art room and was startled when his fingers closed on empty air.

The key! He had lost the key! He dodged into another classroom doorway and frantically searched his pockets. It was nowhere to be found. His face twisted in anxiety. He had dropped the key! Probably in the doorway where he had fought the policemen.

He began to move back along the corridor when he heard the approach of running footsteps and scrambled back into the shadows, a hand across his mouth to muffle his ragged breath.

Other cops had come up from below, alerted by the gunfire. Bobby waited nervously to see what they would do. He didn't want another fight, he only wanted to find the key.

The policemen found the bodies sprawled on the floor and worked quickly. While two stood guard another two lifted their fallen comrades and carried them towards the stairwell at the end of the hall. Bobby heard them go and sighed with relief. They

had not come after him. He was safe for now. He could wait a few minutes just to be sure, and then he would find the key.)

When police captain Lafontaine heard the shots in the school, he snapped on the walkie-talkie clutched in his hand. "What's happened?" he demanded, "Report! Report!"

"Don't know, captain," one of his men replied. "The shots came from upstairs. We're on our way."

Two minutes later the man spoke again. "We've found them, captain. Two of ours--Houle and Denault--hurt, but alive. No sign of the boy."

"Get them out of there," the captain barked into the walkie-talkie. "All of you--clear out!"

Petersen, watching the captain, had left the squad car and stood by his shoulder. "What is it?" he asked.

"The game is over," the captain said bitterly. "The boy has to be stopped."

"What do you mean?"

"We've got to take him, one way or the other--before he hurts anyone else."

"But the hostages," Petersen protested. "He has hostages."

"We don't know that," the captain shrugged. "And if he has, it's likely they're dead already or he would have bargained with us."

The four policemen who had gone into Parkview appeared at



the front door with their fallen comrades. The captain moved across the street to meet them. "Where did it happen?" he asked.

"Third floor. Along the main corridor on the far side. The kid must be holed up in one of the classrooms back there," one of the men explained.

"We'll get him this time," the captain said bitterly. "We'll go in from different sides." Angrily he strode back to the patrol car to call in more men.

Petersen was left standing by the entrance to the school. He had heard the policeman say that Bobby was on the third floor--somewhere towards the back, probably near the art room or the English classes. And the police were going in after him.

Petersen stepped inside the school unobserved in the rush of activity on the street. He wasn't thinking about the danger to himself and felt no sense of fear for his own safety. He was only certain that Stephen Chambers and Christina Arianakis were Bobby's prisoners, and equally certain that when the police converged on the third floor as they planned to do, the two teachers would be killed.

Now, above all, he felt responsible for them. They were his teachers, and their lives were being threatened by a student he had failed to help. If they died he would never be free of the feeling that he had failed them as well--that he had failed to do all he could. They deserved a chance, and he might be able to provide it--if there was still time. Rushing now, he made his

way up the stairs and along the dark corridors.

Bobby's three hostages heard the roar of the guns as they sat bound and gagged in the art room. In desperation, Christina struggled against the rope that held her hands behind her. Bobby had tied her swiftly and carelessly, and the knots were not as tight as they might have been. With a painful tug her hand began to slip its bond until at last, though tears of pain coursed down her cheeks, Christina was free.

Anxiously she struggled to untie the others, unaware whether Bobby had been hurt in the burst of gunfire or was even now racing back to the art room. She could not remove Elena's handcuffs, but even with her hands behind her back the girl was free to run.

"Hurry!" she exclaimed, as she helped Stephen Chambers to his feet and watched him stagger painfully as the blood rushed to his injured head. "We've got to get out of here!"

They pressed towards the door but were stopped in their tracks as it suddenly flew open--and Bobby Bower stood there with the rifle leveled at their chests.

The look of surprise that was stamped on Bobby's face quickly transformed itself to anger as he stared at Christina and the others. When he had been certain that the police had left the corridor he had run back for the key, scrambling on his hands and knees in the shadowy recess where he had lain in wait for the

policemen, until at last his hand had closed over the cold metal that had dropped from his pocket. Now he returned to find this--Elena and Miss Arianakis aiding Stephen Chambers' escape, running away before they had even listened to his story. Rage and despair welled up in him and over him and he trembled as he spoke.

"Why?" he gasped, his eyes filled with tears. "Why did you want to run away?" Why did you want to help him? I would have told you everything and made you understnad. I've watched you and seen you and I know everything that's happened. I've followed him and seen him kiss you both and hold you close. He wanted both of you--he wanted both of you to love him. That was his plan. Then he would have hurt you. He would have left you and you would have been alone. All alone! With no one! But I was watching. I saw him just like I saw John Vavaris. That's why I brought you here. To show you that he deserved to be punished like the others who hurt. But you didn't want to wait. You didn't want to know. You won't listen because you don't care!" He lifted the gun and pointed it directly at Stephen Chambers.

Elena Giannopoulos moved then, throwing herself in front of Chambers, her arms straining against the handcuffs that held them. "No--Bobby," she sobbed. "You can't. Stephen didn't try to hurt anyone! Please Bobby--if you hurt Stephen you'll have to hurt me too!"

Christina stepped to Elena's side. "Elena is right Bobby. Stephen didn't want to hurt us. You've got it all wrong. We've worked it out, Bobby, and you've got to listen. We're all friends, and we don't want to hurt one another. You're the only one who wants to hurt us!"

Bobby stared at them. His finger quivered on the trigger and his face twisted as he stood for a long moment caught in the confusion of his two emotions. "No--" he moaned. "Please--no!" He stepped back just as the gun was suddenly yanked from his hands. He didn't react. He just stood there, his empty hands still held out before him. "I'm your friend," he whispered in a voice almost too small to be heard.

But the two women had turned from him, breaking into sobs of relief and reaching out to embrace one another and the still dazed Stephen Chambers.

Beside the boy, Bob Petersen stood with the rifle in his hand. He had hurried down the hall, and as he approached the art room, had heard Bobby talking loudly in the doorway. The boy's back had been turned, and he had been so preoccupied with what he was saying that there had been no difficulty moving up behind him and snatching the gun from his hands. Surprisingly the boy had made no protest, put up no resistance at all.

"We can go downstairs now, Bobby," the vice-principal said in a gentle voice. "It's finished now."

The boy looked up at him, his head turning slowly towards

the sound of Petersen's voice. There seemed to be no recognition in Bobby's eyes. They were round, empty orbs, shining with a film of tears.

The lights in the hallway flashed on again and the eyes drifted away from Petersen's face to the bright fluorescent bulbs. The boy began to tremble and his face went pale and white. He screamed--a sudden, piercing scream--and in one swift movement he turned and raced down the hallway in a wild headlong flight, the scream of despair still rising from his lips. It was the last sound he ever made.

The sniper sat on the roof of the building that looked down into the courtyard parking lot of Parkview High. Despite his warm clothing, he could feel the icy chill of the wind and clapped his hands together to speed the circulation.

He tensed, suddenly, as he heard a faint, distant scream. His nerves had been on edge ever since he had heard the shots and seen the fire flashes that had cut down his two fellow officers.

Then, because of the darkness, he had been unable to act. But now the lights were on, and as he watched he suddenly saw the figure of a man running past the windows of the third floor corridor. His fingers found the trigger of the rifle as the scope caught the runner in its cross-hairs. For the briefest moment he hesitated, but his orders were clear. The lights had been a signal that other policemen had entered the building and were now

making their way to the third floor. He was to take no chances with their lives. He was to shoot on sight. Calmly he pulled the trigger.

There were few thoughts in Bobby's mind as he fled those final yards down the hallway he had crossed a thousand times before. He knew, deep inside himself where words were never necessary, that somehow he had been wrong and that his life seemed no longer to have a purpose. He knew, as well, that the police were waiting for him, ready to do battle, to struggle one more time for a life that had already ended. They would be surprised when he didn't fight back. They would be so surprised!

When the bullet tore through his chest, Bobby felt a brief, searing moment of pain, and saw, as he died, the face of his mother looking down at him in sadness. And then it was gone. Lost for all time in the darkness that engulfed him.

His body slowly slid down against the door, the back of his shirt catching firmly on the doorknob. Then it stopped falling, held by the shirt caught on the knob. He hung there, like a puppet on a string, while the blood ran from the wound in his chest and splattered on the worn, grey tiles of the hallway floor.

There was a brief movement from beneath the tangled blood-stained shirt, and a large, green toad wriggled to free itself from the twisted material. It fell awkwardly to the floor, its legs kicking as it flopped about to right itself. It sat there

for a moment, its large eyes unblinking, until disturbed by the wet drops that splashed against its warted skin, it began to hop away, with long, slow leaps, down the still and empty corridor.

Epilogue:

Robert Petersen sat silently in the leather chair by the window of his office. The lights in the room were out and the office was dark and sombre, a shadowy reflection of the grey, overcast sky that stretched across the top of the window. He had come in early to finish his report, and still had two hours before the officials arrived from the School Board to begin their own investigation of the Bower shooting three days earlier. He had gone through it all with the police, but the School Board Directors, for reasons of their own, wanted a separate record of the incident.

Petersen's gaze drifted across the office walls, littered now with notices and memos, scraps of the past and reminders of the future; and he recalled the first day he had come into Parkview to meet the staff and begin his real work as the school's vice-principal. That day, too, the school had been quiet and empty. It was the day before the students arrived for the official opening of the new term. He remembered how nervous he had been that day. It had been a new place, and he had come with all his new ideas. He had wanted that first impression to go well. He had wanted to be liked and accepted by the staff, to win their cooperation and to begin bringing about the changes he envisioned.

He had wondered then if he was ready for the year that lay



ahead--if he would be able to transform the school from what it was to what he hoped it could be.

Now he had his answer. There was no Utopia. No constant or ideal that could be captured and put into practice. Like the seasons and the sky, there was movement and change, growth and destruction, from one day to the next.

What would he have done, he thought, that very first day at Parkview--the day he had watched the old Chinese woman sing so melodically as she hung out her wash--what would he have done, then if he had known that in a few short months, under a different, colder sky, a man with a rifle would crouch almost above the very spot where she had stood and deal out death to a boy who hadn't been reached, who had somehow been lost and forgotten--a boy who didn't know of new ideas or old ideas, but who knew that he was sad and lost and lonely.

That was what it was really about. The fear and the loneliness and the fact that the world could sometimes be so very blind and foolish. Bobby was dead, and now they wanted a label for his death. The School Board officials would come into the school, shake their heads and sigh and mutter and fill out another pile of paper that would absolve them of responsibility and quietly be filed under Useless and Forgotten. Like the police, they would learn the facts--the cold, hard statistical facts. But they would never know why Bobby Bower became a killer, and why he had to die when his life should have just begun.

The police had worked quickly and thoroughly, and he had spoken to captain Lafontaine the night before. The captain, grateful that his storming the art room had helped to save Bobby's hostages from further harm, had outlined the results of the police investigation.

Bobby, it seemed, had been badly treated by John Vavaris, whom he had envied and admired. Vavaris had apparently tired of his pretence of friendship with Bobby, had taken to insulting him, and had even been responsible for the beating Bobby had suffered in the school basement.

Bobby, who had always felt lonely and rejected, and who had often disguised his feelings with foolishness, saw his envy of Vavaris turn to hatred.

But it was not only Vavaris who had contributed to Bobby's tragic rampage. They had discovered his unhappy relationship with his step-father, a situation that may have led him to feel that even his mother has somehow rejected him.

The investigation had uncovered his strange and unrequited love for both Elena Giannopoulos and Christina Arianakis, a love that led him to believe that Stephen Chambers wanted to hurt them both by first winning and then breaking their hearts.

In Bobby's confused and troubled mind, the world fell into two categories of people--those like Christina and Elena who were good, and worthy of protection, and those like Vavaris and Reena, who were cruel and evil and ripe for punishment.

Petersen knew that Bobby's mind had been ill, and that tragedy had worked through his illness. But rather than absolve themselves of guilt, they should all accept a share of the responsibility. There would be some who would point a finger only at him and say that was to blame, that his attempts to humanize the school led only to a lack of discipline and its inevitable consequences. But he was beyond caring about that. If they felt he was to blame, perhaps they were not so far from the truth. He had once told his wife that the effort of the job--the effort of tending the whole damn volcano--didn't allow him the time or the foresight to see all the little tears and cracks lying in the shadows. He was to blame--as they all were.

A passage he had once read long ago in a book of poetry spoke for him now. He couldn't quite recall the words, but he knew they expressed precisely what he wanted to say. As he remembered, the poet had said that each of them--all who lived and walked the earth together--were part of a single tree, the roots and trunk and branches linked in a single life, a single existence--that it was impossible for even one leaf to fall without the silent knowledge of the entire tree.

The responsibility was with all of them. They were all to blame, and unless they learned that, the deaths and tragedy were all for nothing.

Perhaps he would mention that to the School Board along with the facts and the statistics. They probably wouldn't know what

he was talking about, but perhaps, they would begin to wonder.

He tapped his pipe on the edge of the ceramic ashtray on his desk and gathered together the notes he had made on the life and death of Bobby Bower. The sky had shifted, and now a thin shaft of sunlight broke through the clouds. Petersen stood for a moment by the window then left his tiny office and made his way down the hallway towards the staffroom. He was early, but he had nothing else to do. He would have a cup of coffee. It would be a long day.

Pat Ender sat on the grey vinyl chair next to Karen Hudak's hospital bed. On the day Bobby had been shot, she had been with the other teachers in the Armory gymnasium when Petersen had finally dismissed the assembled students and then explained to the staff what had taken place in the high school. Now, gently, Pat told Karen about Bobby Bower, and then about John Vavaris. Karen wept openly while Pat held her hand.

"Johnny wasn't a good person," the girl said at last. "But I still loved him. Why do we do that, Pat? Why do we love people we shouldn't?"

Pat Ender shrugged. "Who can say? We don't pick and choose the people we love. It usually just happens whether we like it or not."

For a moment they sat in silence, each with their own thoughts. Pat felt the gentle pressure of the girl's hand against her own.

Karen was looking at her.

"What about you, Pat. What's going to happen to you--with Reena Kellner and everything?"

Pat laughed softly. "You know, somehow that just doesn't seem very important anymore. But at any rate, it seems to have worked out for the best."

"What happened?" Karen wondered.

"Well, I'm not exactly sure," Pat explained. "But it seems that Reena is convinced I saved her life last week, and considering what was going on between us it came as quite a shock to her. I also think that the whole experience gave her quite a scare. She's out of the hospital, but her arm will be in a sling for a while, and she told me last night that she's decided to give up teaching and move out West."

"Then she won't be causing you any more trouble?" Karen asked.

Pat smiled. "No, she won't be causing any trouble. In fact, I'm starting to think I'm her best friend. She called me twice yesterday!" Pat shook her head. "But all of that is not nearly as important as what's happening to you, Karen. What are your plans now? What do you want to do?"

Karen sighed. "I guess I'll be starting over," she said. "My mother is gone. Johnny--is gone." She shrugged and bit her lower lip and waited out the tears that threatened to overcome her. "My aunt Maggie has asked me to live with her," she said

at last. "And I guess I will until school is over and I graduate. Then I want to find a job and get a place of my own. Start over from the beginning. When I get a little money I'd like to take some night classes--go to art school. I think I'd like that."

"Oh Karen, I'm glad," the teacher said. "I'm really glad."

Karen looked at her solemnly for a moment and then took a crumpled letter from beneath the blanket where she had held it in her hand. "My mother left me this," she explained. "She had been carrying it around with her in case--in case something happened. She could never say it to me in words, but she wanted me to know how she felt and she was able to write it down."

Karen handed Pat the letter. "My mother loved me, Pat. She really did love me. And she wants me to be happy. She says in the letter that the most important thing of all is to find out what is good and meaningful in my own life, and then to fight for it and hold on to it no matter what. She said that being happy about yourself was the most important thing in the whole world."

Pat nodded her head slowly. "Your mother was right, Karen. I'm sure you can find what you want, and I know you can be happy. And I want you to know that you're not alone. That you have friends who care about you. That I care about you, Karen, and that you don't have to worry about anything. I'll be around if you need me."

Karen leaned over the edge of the bed and put her arms about the older woman. Gently, and with affection, she kissed her softly on the cheek.

Stephen Chambers and Elena Giannopoulos walked along the snow-packed road that wound its way to the tall iron cross perched on the summit of Mont-Royal. They had met at the foot of the road a few hours before the School Board investigation to be held later that afternoon.

"What are you thinking of?" Stephen asked the girl who walked quietly beside him.

Elena shrugged. "I was just feeling sorry for Bobby," she said. "Deep down he wasn't really a bad person."

"No, he wasn't," Stephen agreed. "I talked to Bob Petersen last night, and he was good enough to let me know what the police have found out."

Elena looked at him expectantly and he went on. "Basically what he said was that Bobby's mind went. That he could only see people in terms of good or bad. He was in love with you and Christina, and he thought I was going to hurt you both. That made me one of the bad people--like Reena and Vavaris--and he wanted to kill me to protect you."

"But he could have talked to us--found out the truth."

"That wasn't Bobby's way. You even mentioned once that Bobby had his own method of dealing with things, and you were right. He kept it all to himself. Petersen says the police

think he may have spent a lot of his time spying on people, judging them, assimilating a lot of impressions and feelings that he may have misunderstood or misinterpreted."

Elena looked surprised. "You mean that time we were at your apartment--I thought I saw someone in the shadows. It might have been--"

"It probably was," Stephen nodded. "And because Bobby kept so much inside him, we never got a real chance to help him. Even Christina didn't realize the extent of Bobby's feelings, and she was as close to him as anyone."

Elena spoke sadly. "I had a chance to help him and I didn't," she said. "He asked me out, but I said I couldn't go. I didn't want to go."

"Don't blame yourself for that," Stephen said. "I doubt that it would have done Bobby any good. In fact, it probably would have made things worse. He may have needed more attention than we gave him, but he needed professional help a lot more. Living in this world is like fighting a war--Bobby was one of the many casualties."

"Stephen--don't say that!" Elena protested. "It makes being alive seem so--so futile."

"I'm sorry," Stephen responded gently, putting his arm around the girl's shoulder. "I didn't mean to give that impression. I don't think life is futile at all."

Elena glanced up at him, and he tried to explain. "Remember



that day in class when we were discussing Hamlet, and you said that a tragedy can sometimes be a hopeful experience. Well, I sort of look at this--at what happened to Bobby in that kind of light. Like Hamlet, Bobby's power to act was limited, so he did what he could. Like Hamlet, his actions resulted in death and tragedy. But also like the play, Bobby's life--and death--have brought out our sympathy and our pity--and hopefully, as a result, our ability to be more understanding, and to go on looking for answers we still haven't found."

He sighed, and his eyes swept across the windswept slope. "Sure, Bobby was no Hamlet, no Prince of Denmark with a message of hope and courage, but he did teach us that we have to be the ones doing the fighting--that we all have to do our share to hold off life's endless sea of troubles. That it can't all be left to kings and madmen. That's what Bobby's death can teach us--and that's why we can always go on even when tragedy takes its toll.

They held hands and walked on in silence. They had tried to understand what Bobby had done and to accept it, and they could do no more than that for now. In the silence, their thoughts turned to one another. Below them, through the branches of the leafless trees, they could see Fletcher's Field Park, and beyond that, the elegantly faded buildings of Esplanade Street.

The sun had broken through its cover of cloud and glistened on the soft, moist snow. A warm wind blew gently across the park,

carrying on its breath an early promise of spring.

"Did you really mean it--the other day--when you told Bobby that you loved me?" Stephen said at last, kissing Elena's hand as he spoke.

"Yes, of course I meant it," Elena insisted. "Don't you believe me?"

"I believe you," Stephen murmured. "I just have a hard time believing I could be so lucky."

"Do you love me, Stephen?" the girl whispered softly.

"Yes, and you know I do," the man answered. "In fact I think you knew it before I did. Sometimes, for some people, something has to happen before they can fully understand what they are and how they feel. And Friday, when I thought I was going to be killed--when I thought we were all going to die--I suddenly understood how much I really love you, and how much I wanted to live and to go on loving you. I'm sorry about Bobby--sorry it had to happen. But it gave me something I didn't fully have before. It let me know just who and what I am--what I really want out of life. In a way, Elena, it gave me you."

The girl closed her eyes and squeezed his arm with her hand. "I'm the one who's lucky," she said quietly. "So very, very lucky."

Stephen laughed softly. "We'll see how lucky you are when your family finds out about us," he said teasingly.

"Oh--no!" Elena groaned. "My parents. For a moment I'd

forgotten about them! My mother is going to have something to say about all this--you can be sure of that!"

Stephen nodded. Christina Arianakis had once explained to him how concerned Greek parents were with preserving tradition and keeping the honor of the family name. They preferred arranged marriages and chaperoned dates. "I've given it some thought," he said. "And although I want to respect your parents' feelings, the more I think about it the less reasonable their argument becomes. We don't live in Greece anymore--in a small village where things are done the old way. We live here and now, and its our future waiting for us out there. I'm not Greek, and I'm not rich, and your parents didn't bring me home to court you--but when they see how much I love you--how much we love each other--I'm sure they'll understand and they'll be happy for both of us."

"And if they don't understand?" Elena asked, some lingering doubt still in her voice.

Stephen laughed warmly. Her parents would be upset for a while, he knew that. But if they loved Elena half as much as they seemed to, he knew they would eventually come to accept their relationship. But whatever happened, he and Elena would face it together. They had faced death together, and now they could face life together.

"If they don't," he whispered in her ear, "I'll disguise myself as a pillow and you can take me home to live in your room."

Elena smiled. Stephen was trying to make her laugh, but she knew he took her seriously. There would be a lot to talk about. Her parents would have to face reality, but she wanted to help them as much as possible. Yes, there would be a lot to talk about, but now they had time--their whole lives--to do it.

"Do you promise?" she said.

"Yes--I promise."

They kissed, their hearts touched by love and their thoughts filled with one another. Then, turning their backs on the city, they walked arm in arm up the twisting road towards the crest of the Mountain.

THE END